



Stay Woke



A Sermon By
Ms. Anna Broadbent

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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/0530-2017-11-12-AB.mp3>.

In Which Authority Do You Stand?

Ms. Anna Broadbent
Grace Episcopal Church
The Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost
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My friend Jeff tells me that there are two types of people in the world. Those who fill their gas tanks when the gauge says half full and those who gamble with fate and will drive 30 miles past the gas light just to see how many miles one can get to the tank. Jeff says this to me as I'm coasting into a gas station holding my breath that we'll make it. If you want to know what type of person Rev. Andrew is, rest assured that he fills his tank faithfully. In light of our Gospel reading today I have to admit that Andrew is a wise bridesmaid, while I may be considered foolish to some.

As I was preparing for this sermon I read a few commentaries, as a good seminarian does, and what surprised me is that multiple commentaries stated that this was one of the most straight forward parables of Jesus and, I'd like to particularly point out, the commentaries suggested one of the easiest parables to preach on. I'd like to call their bluff. I'm not sure about you, but this is a difficult parable for me to make sense of. The tradition of the bridesmaids and the bridegroom as well as the Jewish wedding customs of Jesus' time are foreign to us. The use of lamps and oil are challenging, the best I can relate, as much as I hate to admit it is forgetting to bring my charger with me for my phone or my computer when I'm away from home.

Then there's this whole talk about what we like to call the eschaton - or the return of Christ. The last line of our passage today is "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." It is commonly understood that here, Jesus is talking about his return at some point. This is the space and time that we are living in. We as Episcopalians aren't particularly comfortable talking about the second coming or Jesus' return, but we do profess it each week that we celebrate Eucharist together. Please take a look at your bulletins and read the bolded words on page 7 that follow:

Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith:

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

Since we believe that Christ will come again, there must be something in this parable that we are supposed to be paying attention to... there's something here for us. So, what does it mean for us, in this day and age to, "Stay Awake because we do not know the day or the hour?"

If we look at our text for today, it doesn't seem that what it means to "stay awake" in this context has much to do with physically not sleeping. In Jesus' parable all 10 of the bridesmaids have their lamps filled and are waiting for the bridegroom to arrive when all 10 fall asleep. All that separates the wise bridesmaids and the foolish is the fact that the five foolish bridesmaids did not bring with them additional oil to refill their lamps. The light from the lamps, fueled by the oil of course, seems to be what allows the bridegroom to recognize the bridesmaids. When the foolish bridesmaids return to the bridegroom after refilling their lamps and request to be let in, the bridegroom says that he does not know them... he does not recognize them.

So if staying awake has little to do with our physical state - then what does it mean to be awake in this case. This may be a stretch, but to stay awake as Jesus is suggesting here is very similar to the terminology we hear these days about what it means to be Woke. To be woke - in our culture is something along the lines of having an increased awareness of racial and social injustices as well as the privileges that one may carry as a result of oppression. To be woke is about consciousness and awareness. It's a state of mind. It is wisdom.

So let's consider the oil – the thing that fuels the light that allows the bridegroom or Christ to recognize us – as a type of consciousness. And this consciousness is what separates the wise bridesmaids from the foolish. Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest and writer says in her book, *Wisdom Jesus*, *“The oil stands for something that has to be individually created in you through your own conscious striving. Nobody can give it to you; Nobody can take it away. The oil is the quality of your transformed consciousness. You have to do the work yourself.”*

When we think of the oil in this manner it makes this parable easier to digest for me. I've always struggled with the wise bridesmaids' responses to the foolish ones request to share their oil. The lack of sharing goes against basic principles we are taught in Sunday school. When we think of the oil as our consciousness and awareness that it makes sense why it wasn't shared... because it cannot be shared. I am unable to share my consciousness with you, nor you with me. The wise could not share their oil with the foolish, because they needed go through the experience themselves.

So how do we stay woke today? How do we cultivate our oil while we are waiting for Christ's return? How can guarantee that our lamps will continue to burn and that the bridegroom will recognize us?

The simple answer to these questions is through the practice of cultivating a Christian life. It's through having a rich and healthy prayer life through which we develop a relationship with God. It's through being a part of a faithful community, like Grace, that holds you accountable to living a life that reflects the life that was modeled in Jesus. It's through being in relationships that deepen your understanding of what it means that all of humanity is made in the image of God and all people are truly created equally. And it's encouraging others to build up their own oil and their own woke consciousness. These are all things that help build up our oil reserves and what ultimately make us Disciples of Christ.

Please note that I called this a practice because that is exactly what it is. There's no such thing as a perfect disciple. Throughout our lives our oil levels will vary. There will be time when our spiritual practices are dry and dark and there will be times when they are abundantly fruitful and life giving. The most important thing for us to remember is that it is a practice. We must be loving and gentle with ourselves when we drift from our practices and guide ourselves back this is where our church community can be very supportive.

So my dear friends, let us all stay woke and continue to practice. Keep your oil handy and your lamps lit for you know neither the day nor the hour. Amen.