

“Taking Into Account”

March 28, 2010

The Reading

The reading is from the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, verses 1 through 13. This chapter is part of what is called “the little apocalypse” of the Gospel narrative where Jesus announces to his disciples how the Reign of God will arrive. It is according to the *New Revised Standard Version*, the most reliable in terms of translation faithfulness to the original languages, according to biblical scholars. The Gospel of Matthew was written sometime during the decade of the 80s of the Common Era, some 50 or more years after the death of Jesus. The author of the narrative has Jesus speaking to his disciples on the Mount of Olives.

Here begins the reading.

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Here ends the reading.

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by  
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March 28, 2010

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When, in the mid-1980s I was attending seminary at the Starr King School for Ministry in Berkeley, there was afoot a major change in most if not all ministries, including our Unitarian Universalist ministry. The feminist movement of the 1970s was changing many aspects of male-dominated attitudes in our society. Ministry was no exception. It wasn't just because more women were entering our Unitarian Universalist ministry. There was a change in the relational landscape between clergy and parishioner – especially male clergy and women parishioners. A major and extreme spokesperson for this relational change was Marie Fortune. She sponsored workshops for clergy, lifting up the issues of power – the power of the clergy that is inherent in religious society. Stemming from both the Jewish and Christian traditions, that power was bestowed upon the clergy by either a hierarchy in the name of God or a congregation in the name of sacred authority. This power was taken for granted in the past and never questioned. Since in the past nearly all clergy were men, the issue raised by Fortune looked at how that inherent power was acted out from a feminist perspective. In many regards, the picture was not pretty. That power in some cases was abused. Sometimes it was verbal; sometimes dehumanizing; sometimes it was physical and emotional. Some clergymen would take sexual advantage of that power with women members of the congregation – even within our Unitarian Universalist fold. I recall the firestorm when for the first time a prominent and beloved Unitarian Universalist colleague lost his Fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) due to his sexual use of a number of women members in his congregation. He was stripped of his ability to serve our congregations. There were some colleagues who thought that he did nothing wrong pulling the “consenting adult” card. The UUA saw it as an abuse of power and acted accordingly.

We are currently witnessing the turmoil in the Roman Catholic Church over pedophilia among priests that ranges over many decades. There is no question in my mind this is a prime example of the abuse of clergy power. It is also an example of the institution not taking responsibility for its care of both parishioners and its priests. How it will eventually play out remains to be seen. To think the Pope and his Cardinals can just issue letters of apology will prove to be unsatisfactory for many Catholics. Those hurt by the power abuse of the priest carry scars through their lives. It is as if the Church is saying this is the way things ought to be. Whereas our UUA in its past let men clergy be men clergy with their congregations (nudge, nudge; wink, wink), when it was called to be responsible, the UUA stepped up to the plate with resolve – and still does to this day. Our Association sees this as a social justice issue, a place the Roman Church has yet to explore entirely. In a recent article in the *Economist* magazine, it was noted that if one stands on an absolute morality and breaks that obligation, then one would be judged by the same absolute standards. This is the issue facing the Church today: to what extent will the Bishops, Cardinals, even the Pope, be held accountable to the same moral standards it teaches and preaches? My hope is that the Church will soon assume the hard work of taking responsibility for the culture and system it has created that allowed this to continue unabated. As a minister, I look upon all other ministers, pastors, rectors, preachers, priests, nuns, rabbis and imams as colleagues. It sickens me

to know that some of my colleagues can abuse their power with impunity and without appropriate institutional response. The power of the ministry is a sacred duty and to defile and abuse it in any way is a trampling of all that is holy in life.

What would cause such an abuse of power? It didn't take me long as a budding architect to realize that all professions are in their most shadowed side, tribal. Each profession has its own preparation and initiation rites, its own language held to be sacred and its own standards of behavior. There may be keen competition within the tribe for status and stature, but once it perceives to be attacked from the outside, the shields go up and the ranks tightly closed. Whatever misbehavior seen by those outside, too often those inside ignore it. Ministry is no different. That was certainly the case when Fortune took her stand against clergy abuse. I am most pleased that some measures taken by the Association and our congregations have diminished the negative "tribal" aspects of ministry. Church life is no longer the arduous work of committees under the thumb of the minister, but rather the offering of gifts and talents as sharing a ministry.

There is also another aspect of abuse of power. That occurs often in the family. In some family systems, a parent may be the abuser in one way or another, either physically or emotionally. In some cases it could be a sibling. In any case, a family system carries over into our adult lives after we leave the nest. Too often we will see that acted out in the business environment. How each one fits into the many systems one encounters in adult life depends upon how one can be responsible for one's own actions. Our actions do have consequences that affect others. That is one reason for taking into account how our actions can be effective and affective. That means being accountable for our actions and decisions. That was what was remiss in the days of the "good ole boy" abuses in ministry and the current unreported incidents of pedophilia. There is great personal responsibility that emerges due to significant changes in the way we operate within a system and that which takes place in our personal lives.

When change is thrust upon us, having to make major alterations to our usual and expected patterns of behavior and routines become difficult if not painful. Often we may see the threat of change as a crisis. However, there is the chance to see it as an opportunity; a way of change in one's self as a part of personal responsibility. That was the case with the change in ministry – and for my part, for the better. The dignity and sanctity of ministry was enhanced and expanded by its close introspection and compassion. Yet, it was a process that required a new way of seeing one's relationship with others. It was a realization of the relationship between personal and institutional responsibility. In our long-term relations with others, we enter into the realm of a sustainable personal responsibility. There is some form of accountability related to that relationship. We will, of course, make mistakes. Those mistakes need to be acknowledged and the relationship repaired. Sometimes those mistakes are not of a personal nature, but rather occurring within the system of relationships as in institutions and business. In that case, there isn't any room for the blame game. The mistake is in the system, of which one must take responsibility as being a part of it, yet not the sole responsibility. Then the repair is in the system, as was deemed necessary by the Association over 20 years ago and must be the same for the Roman Church today. That change in the UUA's attitude toward ministerial behavior meant a change for those embedded in the previous system of abuse. That change led to an essential responsibility on the part of the person in relationship with others.

Speaking of relationships, what about the ten bridesmaids in the reading? There are many theological and doctrinal spins on the story of the ten bridesmaids in the Gospel of Matthew. One can tease

out many interpretations to suit one's already established theology or doctrine. The enigmatic nature of most of the parables attributed to Jesus are like that: open to many interpretations. The inherent ambiguity offers many ways of seeing the story. When Worship Associate Rebecca Graves presented the passage in the reading as a possible starting point for this sermon, I found it most appropriate for the theme of responsibility in relationship. Looking at it just as a story without the usual doctrinal baggage, it is one of responsibility. What it says to me is something that comes up quite frequently in our lives. That is, your lack of planning is not my emergency.

This came about for me several years ago. When I decided to have Advent Vespers before Christmas, I announced the time for the event. (I hope you know that "vesper" is a tribal term for "evening services.") However, just before the first vespers, I realized I hadn't been in touch with Desi Long, our Music Director. What, a vesper without music? After my panic moment subsided, I realized that my lack of planning should not be Desi's emergency, so the lack of music in the vesper is a reward as the season imposes so much canned music upon us. If one has not made adequate preparation for an event with some sort of contingency, is it necessarily incumbent to impose that inadequacy upon the relationship: usually, no; but yet, perhaps, sometimes, yes. Given the circumstances presented in the story of the bridesmaids, when should one reach out to the aid of another? Let's take another look at the story.

As a story, the ten bridesmaids are on a nighttime trek to meet a bridegroom at a banquet. As an allegory, the journey of the wise and foolish is to meet the Messiah and the arrival of the Reign of God. In the allegory, those who are wise will make it, and those who are foolish will not. There is a division of class here. For the wise to share would mean all wouldn't make it – a nothing or all situation for the wise. This sounds like one of those impossible ethical problems that require the sacrifice of someone for the sake of the whole. However, it remains for me a question that if the wise were so wise, why didn't they caution the foolish about not bringing enough oil? Wouldn't that be the responsible thing to do? While there was some wisdom around, there was enough foolishness for everyone. Leaving the allegory for those who wish to preach salvation to the elite only, as a story, there is a thread of shared responsibility that was not exercised. We do, indeed, share in our responsibilities. That is the personal power we all share in our journeys in life.

Our personal power resides in our self-esteem and is exercised in our relationships. To be truly wise is to be conscious of the context within which one resides. We do live in a culture that has created the means by which we can be isolated from the surrounding realm of responsibility. Witness the tribal aspects of so many professions. Stepping outside the confines of the tribal, of the separation between the wise and the foolish, responsibility is power *with* and not power *over*. I believe this is a necessary understanding in all forms of ministry. However, society tends to deem the necessity of a hierarchical realm of power, emphasizing that of power over. Whatever authority one achieves in one's vocation, it is due to what one has earned in relationship and not because one was properly initiated into the rites for the position. This comes to the fore for me with my position on the Midwest Regional Sub-committee on Candidacy and interviewing aspirants into our ministry. Sometimes, within the brief time to establish a relationship with the aspirant, there may be questions of suitability for ministry. Knowing that mistakes will be made in ministry, I have to ask myself, "What is the worst damage this person could possibly do to a congregation?" And secondly, "Can this person take responsibility for any mistakes?" In spite of the story in Matthew, there must be wisdom in the midst of our foolishness.

Changes in our lives spawn a new sense of responsibilities and power. What is the cost of adjusting to change and taking responsibility? This will depend upon the nature of the change. In the personal realm, change may take place due to a major alteration or abandonment of a relationship. Other aspects may include a major change in one's physical and/or mental capabilities. These are challenging to one's self-esteem and dignity. Yet, the power of the human spirit and will can overcome such debilitating moments. One's faith in one's abilities, or in a supportive relationship, or as some may wish, in God, this strength would overcome adverse conditions in time. For me, at both the personal and institutional levels, I find your response to my retirement from this pulpit to be an outstanding example of renewed responsibility and self-proclaimed power. You have found an endless supply of oil in your flasks of resources, faith and resolve. May you always be so wise.

Amen.