

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 27—Year A
Wisdom 6:12–16
Wisdom of Solomon 6:17-20
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

Whew. How many feelings have you felt this week? Confusion? Frustration? Impatience? Disbelief? Curiosity? Sadness? Anxiety? Fear? Anger? Hope? Bafflement? Relief? Grief? Exhaustion? All of the above, all at the same time? It's been quite a week.

While some *results* have *become clearer*, others remain *incomplete*. *Official tallies* won't be *certified* for weeks, followed by the *Electoral College* doing its thing on December 14th. And, let's pause and express our gratitude to our *fellow citizens* who have worked the polls and seen this process through in local and state boards of election. These are our neighbors, and they have done a service on all our behalf; we are in their debt.

Razor thin margins have issued in *requests for recounts*, as they should. *Legal challenges* will work their way through—*that's how our system works*. It's still going to take time for **final resolution**, and that's **just on the election** itself. **Resolution as a country** is going to be much harder to come by.

My predominant feeling this week has been **sadness** stemming from the awareness that **we are as deeply divided as we thought we were**. This *isn't media spin* or *commentary* or *surmising*—this was **people voting in ways that people who voted differently are really struggling to understand**. It feels like **parallel universes** with equally **parallel perspectives never destined to connect**.

As people struggle to *make sense of this week* and *calm the spinning in their brains*, there are **quick assessments painting whole swaths of the country with broad strokes**. It's **more complex** than that. It's **always more complex**. **Quick assessments** may reward **that part of brain that likes to get things defined and sorted** into the **proper categories that then makes them feel more manageable**, **quick assessments** may even *feel* like **knowledge**, but they rarely lead to wisdom.

What are we missing about each other? What are we missing about our country? What are we missing about our history? What are we missing about the ways we are changing as a people? Where are our blindspots? What needs to be brought into the light? All important questions that will take time to answer.

I have been thinking a lot this week about **Jesus' answer to Pilate** in **John's gospel** when **Pilate asks Jesus if he is the King of the Jews**. Jesus replies, **"My kingdom is not from this world."**

It's *hard to remember* that **we have dual-citizenship**, especially during a week like this one when many of us are so **heavily invested in our work** as **citizens of the United States**. Jesus understands that **there are times when we must exercise those responsibilities**—the whole **"render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's"** thing. **But we must never forget that we are also citizens of the kingdom of God**—the whole **"and render unto God the things that are God's."**

And Jesus' kingdom, God's kingdom, is not *from* this world. It doesn't derive its power *from* this world. As people of faith, our citizenship in God's kingdom is primary. *All* our earthly allegiances are secondary *to* our participation in God's kingdom.

Sometimes, we forget that we live in *both* these worlds, especially when our citizenship responsibilities in this world consume us, as they have this week. But *today* is a great opportunity to recapture our perspective and get our alignments right. Cynthia Bourgeault is helpful here. We stay aligned vertically, tethered on each end in God's kingdom, tethered in the life revealed in the Jesus' way, made real as we live out in our baptismal vows. We stay aligned vertically with God as we move through horizontal time and space, tending to our earthly responsibilities.

And our lessons today anchor us well in this vertical alignment. First, the Collect reminds us that God's blessed Son came into the world to destroy the works of the devil, *diabolos*, the one who delights in throwing us apart. And since I'm going to be talking about the devil, I want to be perfectly clear, *for the record*, I don't believe that Mr. Trump nor Mr. Biden are the devil; the power of *diabolos* is *way bigger than any one person*. Jesus came into this world to destroy *all those forces that are seeking to drive us apart*. I wonder what would happen if we could focus our energy, *together, with Jesus*, on casting out the works of that divisive energy, instead of focusing on destroying the *human beings, ourselves included*, who have become *seduced and consumed* by the power of division and discord.

Then, we rarely get passages from Ecclesiasticus, also known as the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, but we get *two today*—in the first lesson and in the response that replaces the psalm. These lessons call us powerfully to wisdom.

And this is one of those beautiful places in the Hebrew scriptures that give us deeply feminine imagery. Wisdom is personified in this text and her pronouns are she/her/hers.

Ecclesiasticus is pretty much saying, "*You've got to discern her, love her, seek her. Wisdom is longing to make herself known to those who desire her, but you do have to desire her; she doesn't just fall out of the sky upon you. But wow, what is possible when you fix your thought on her—it's perfect understanding. And when you are vigilant on her account, you will soon be free of care because even as you seek wisdom, she is seeking you. And to those participating in this dance of seeking and being sought, wisdom graciously appears to them in their paths and meets them in every thought.*"

In the path we have walked this week, and will continue to walk in the weeks to come, wisdom will appear to us all along the way; wisdom is waiting to meet us in every thought as we keep our eye trained upon her. *If we are attentive, we will know, in the deep places, that we aren't traveling this road alone.*

And the response to this first lesson continues this stream of thought. Hear it again:
The beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction,
and concern for instruction is love of her,
and love of her is the keeping of her laws,

**and giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality,
and immortality brings one near to God;
so the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom.**

It all starts with the **desire for instruction**, the **desire to be taught**, to **learn**, to **think anew**, to **think deeper**, and **this desire** issues forth in **love of this wisdom**. And **this love has legs**, it **involves action** in the **keeping of her laws**, in the **living of an aligned life**, and **living an aligned life** tethers us to **God and eternity and immortality** and to a **space that is beyond time and place**, to **Presence itself**. And *this brings us near to God*. So, what *begins* with the **spark of desire** *leads* us to the **kingdom of God**.

And we carry that **kingdom within us**, *even* as we move through the **kingdoms of this world**.

This is **deeper than theories**, *well-thought out ones or conspiracies*; this is **deeper than analysis**; this is **deeper than knowledge**. When you taste **this wisdom**, *you'll know it* because it lacks the **bite of bitterness**, and *the more you taste this wisdom*, the more you find you've lost your taste for **dividing the world into ever smaller slices of "us" and "them."**

I Thessalonians **"does not want [us] to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."** It just **doesn't matter** when you die, **Jesus is going to catch us all up together in the end**. I find this **unbelievably hopeful** when it *feels* like so much is **dying**. Paul gives us this **bedrock promise** that **God, through Jesus, can make the dead rise**. *Out of the ashes that turn to dust, God is fashioning a new creation*. Want to know **just how powerful that risen life can be, just how much that new life can transform and transcend the powers of sin and evil and death?** Well, **just fix your eyes on Jesus dancing down that garden path as he left that tomb of death behind having journeyed through hell for days**. In the big, big, big picture, *the power of resurrection wins out in the end*, even when it has to spend some time among the **dead first**.

And finally, there's that sort of **weird passage** in **Matthew** about the **bridesmaids** and their **lamps**, and **who remembered to bring the oil** and **who didn't**, and **how that all played out when those who didn't had to go and find the 1st century version of 7-Eleven**, and how they weren't **there when the bridegroom came, and they missed the wedding banquet**. Okay, I'll be honest, this hits my *"seriously, couldn't you have shared"* button. But again, **Cynthia Bourgeault** comes at this passage from a **wisdom perspective**—*it simply is true that you can't give your first-hand experience, your inner-knowing, to another*. There isn't a **quick and easy way to obtain the oil**. You have to **cultivate** it; you have to **tend** it; you have to **walk the walk over time**; we *do* have a role to play in **keeping awake**.

And **when we don't tend our lamps, our light goes out**, and it's **really hard to find our way to the wedding banquet in the dark**. *Even amidst the insanity of this week, the table is being set for the feast, but we miss the hallmarks of it if all we can see are the works of the devil hell-bent, literally, on keeping us apart*.

In these times, it is **so important to maintain our spiritual practices that fill our lamps**.

Slowing down, taking time to rest in the presence of God, stepping out of the noise and into the quiet spaces where God can have God's way with us. Praying. Praying together as community. Interceding for the world. Calling upon the saints to guide us. Seeking wisdom. Asking Jesus to enlighten us and guide our actions. Loving from a deeper place. Drinking in nature and beauty and play to balance the fierce work of justice. Justice guided by our egos will eventually turn to injustice down the road; justice must always be guided by wisdom if it is to lead us to the kingdom of God.

So, how we spend our time right now *really matters* if we are to join God in the kingdom work ahead of us.

In due course, step by precious step, our country will sort out this election. At this point, it's out of our hands, but even as we let this election go, wisdom is reaching for our hand to pull us deeper, to pull us forward, to pull us wider, pull us broader, so that we can see more and more from her vantage point; so that we can desire more and more what she sees and know, in the deepest way possible, beyond what knowledge alone can bring us, that, though this world is shaking apart, we are tethered; we are a still point, filled with the peace of God that passes all understanding.

This may be the biggest contribution we can offer the world right now—to be that still point, to be that presence of peace, to trust that the oil we've been cultivating will throw enough light on the path to find our way to the wedding banquet, and this cynical world needs us to believe that there is, indeed, a table big enough for us all.

If we are to help our fellow citizens through this time, it will be because we haven't lost sight of where our true citizenship lies. Maybe we can help our fellow citizens find where they're true citizenship lies, too—a place where we are bound one to another as brothers and sisters, as neighbors and kin, bound in a love that is stronger than the devil would ever have us believe. Amen.

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