

Sermon Sunday November 12, 2023

This past week, I've been down in the mountains of western North Carolina writing icons in a guided retreat. The one I did this week, St Photini and Jesus at the well, was a challenging one, and it provided much fuel for prayer and patience, never my strong suit.

The phrase that was the focus of our common work came from the poet Mary Oliver, whom I've talked about before. It was simple: "Pay attention. Be amazed. Tell people about it."

Pay attention.

Be amazed.

Tell people about it.

As we painted the icons, as we struggled with parts of them, as we rejoiced when we figure out how to make something work, as we saw errors we had made, we lived into those eight words on a daily basis.

Pay attention.

Be amazed.

Tell people about it.

We paid attention to our teacher, of course. We paid attention to the details of the icon. We watched how others did the work and tried to follow their wisdom. We were often frustrated but occasionally amazed as the icons came into themselves. And now I'm telling you about it, because it's not just about this thing I did, it's about the thing that happened to us as we all did it together.

Over the past several weeks we have delved deeply into the parables of Jesus as retold in the Gospel according to Matthew. We have been told why Jesus spoke in parables: they were a way to convey something theologically complex and topsy-turvy in a way that the average person in the crowd could understand.

But as I was laboring over my icon, aggravated by the difficulty I was having portraying Jesus in conversation with this Samaritan woman at the well, I found myself thinking about how Jesus was actually living into the eight words. In the icon he is looking intently at the Samaritan woman, whom the Orthodox calls "Photini," "the Enlightened One." She is looking back, wondering what he's talking about. She knows about well water. This Living Water that Jesus is telling her

about is surprising and somewhat incomprehensible, but she's listening and trying to understand. But before the conversation has even started, here's the first thing: Jesus is paying attention. Paying attention to her, seeing her open heart. Rather like he is telling us to be in the saga of the wise bridesmaids and the foolish ones. We are to pay attention, because we don't know when he is coming. He is paying attention to Photini, and she is starting to understand what he is telling her. He is paying attention to us, who so often get his message wrong and go off in the wrong direction. Paying attention is the first thing Jesus teaches us, and he so often models it without words.

These bridesmaids, excited by the festivities, aren't really paying attention to what they need to do to prepare themselves. The brighter ones have some extra oil for their lamps just in case. The more ditzy ones don't, so when the bridegroom comes unexpectedly late, they're caught short. Pay attention, because the Bridegroom is coming. Pay attention, because Jesus is coming. Pay attention, so you're prepared.

I doubt Photini, that Samaritan woman, had any idea what her encounter with this stranger, a Jew, not normally someone who would talk to Samaritans, would do to her. But Jesus was paying attention, and the result was a conversation that did what? It amazed her. Be amazed! Perhaps the wise bridesmaids were amazed at their own foresight to bring the extra oil, and were so happy that they were able to do what they were supposed to do.

And then there's the last phrase: tell people about it! In the story of Jesus' encounter with Photini, she goes and tells all of her village about her meeting, and this Jewish rabbi who promised Living Water. She told people about it. And when Jesus told the parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids, that story was told and retold a thousand times over. Otherwise, it would not be enshrined in Scripture.

If we pay attention, there are moments where something happens. A conversation. A kind gesture. A comfort in grief. An "attaboy!" A smile. Those moments, glimmers of Jesus in our peripheral vision, are easy to miss.

And yet if we see them, we might relish them, not just let them flit by. Photini could have gone back into the village and said "yeah. There was this weird Jewish guy by the well. He was strange." And then nothing more might have happened.

The wise bridesmaids might not have said, "Thanks be to God that we were able to light the way. What a remarkable thing that was!" They might have said "those other dopey girls were useless, weren't they?" That would be the end of that.

But Photini didn't. The wise bridesmaids didn't. Photini told the townspeople. The story of the wise bridesmaids was retold as a song of joy, not just a celebration of their foresight.

What might we see if we pay attention? What will amaze us? The deeply hued maple leaf on the path. The grandchild who recognizes us and smiles. The hug at the moment we needed it. The baby who survives the bombing. The chemo that worked. The person who says "I'm sorry" so softly we can barely hear it. The moment we are amazed...

...and then we tell people about it. Not because it's a story that makes us the hero of our own tale. Not because we are seeking applause. Simply because when we see the gleam of Jesus in our lives, no matter how brief, it's worth telling others about, so that they can look for those moments as well.

Imagine if what we talked about was not about who was right and who was wrong, who was not like us, how if we ran the world it would be just fine...what if we talked about those Jesus gleams? What if we were amazed and told people about what amazed us? And felt Jesus surround us with encouragement and love and truth and care?

What if we paid attention?

What if we were amazed?

What if we told people about it?

Amen.