

Jeff's reflection – November 8, 2020

Sometimes in life, a door seems to close – close on dreams, expectations, joy. But sometimes a door opens – opens into a new and profound understanding of oneself, of life, of God; opens into a new vision of peace; opens into a new and profound sense of a Love that affirms our identity.

Jack Kornfield tells a story of such a moment. Kornfield is an author and teacher of Buddhist mindfulness.

His story is about a math teacher in Indiana. One year, this teacher had a class of particularly difficult students.

On one of those days when the class seemed particularly focused on NOT learning, the teacher herself disrupted the usual routine of the class.

She wrote on the board the names of the 31 students. Then she asked everyone to copy the names onto a sheet of paper. Once everyone had done so, she told them they had 15 minutes to write down beside each name, something they admired about that particular student. After 15 minutes, she collected the papers and dismissed the class.

A few months later, when the class was again being difficult, the teacher said to the students, "I have something to pass out to you."

The teacher had cut all of the student's pages into strips, then created a separate page for each student, gluing to that page the comments about that particular student. She gave each student their page of comments.

Several years later, one of the teacher's students from that class, was killed while serving in the Middle East. The student's mother phoned the teacher and asked if she would attend the funeral.

After the service and the committal, the mother walked up to the teacher, standing by the graveside. The mother said to the teacher, "my son had very few things with him when he died, but they found this in his pocket."

She handed the teacher the piece of paper on which his 31 classmates had written what they admired about him.

There was a young woman standing next to the teacher. She said, "I carry mine, too. I look at it whenever life gets tough."

Another of the mourners who was standing nearby said, "I incorporated my list into my wedding vows."

I think that story resonates with us because we all want to have such a list we can turn to – we all want to be assured, reminded, affirmed in who we are, told that there is something beautiful, noble, admirable, good within us.

Too many don't remember the words of affirmation, but the hurtful words – the words that name our 'deficiencies', our times of 'failure', our places of woundedness.

The parable we have in today's reading from Matthew, does that. Ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom to arrive. Five have brought enough oil to keep their lamps burning. Five have not.

And they have forever after been known, respectively, as the five 'wise' maidens' and the five 'foolish' maidens.

And then, the most chilling moment in the parable – five maidens, having arrived after the doors are closed, knock, and are told, 'I DO NOT KNOW YOU!!'

Another time, Jesus says, 'Knock and the door shall be opened.' In this parable the one called Lord, hears someone knocking and says, 'I do not know you.'

The students in our story, kept their pieces of paper because those pages contained messages from others saying, "I know you – I know you are caring, you are brave, you are coping with so much and still showing up, you make me laugh, you have a nice smile, you appreciate the birds resting on a branch..."

Jesus says to Zacchaeus, the tax collector scorned by the other villagers – 'You are a child of Abraham and I am going to dine at your house today.' He said to the thief hanging on a cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

The Jesus who calls us friends is the Jesus who embodies the God who knows us, who knows each of us, knows each of us a beloved child, who does not divide us into loved and cursed, wise and foolish, worthy and unworthy...and who does not tell anyone they are no longer welcome.

The Gospel writer adds a footnote to this parable – "Keep awake."

Consider this – what if the parable is not about the way God treats 'foolish' people, but about what happens in societies when we are no longer awake to God's presence in the world? Doors are closed, we don't recognize others, we don't welcome or include others, people cease to be seen in all of their humanity, people become just designations – foolish ones?

We need to awaken to the image of God embodied in every person, to the sacred

present in all creation; awake to the sufferings of creation; awake to the sufferings of humanity – people in Care facilities who cannot be visited by family and friends; indigenous communities without access to safe drinking water; people whose lives are confined by illness, addiction, poverty, violence.

Remembrance Day should remind us to be awake – awake to the suffering caused by war; awake to the loss of humans beings all of whom probably once were once students whom someone admired – students from Canada, the United States, Iran, Cambodia, Germany, France, Vietnam, Russia, Israel, Palestine, South Africa –

Author Sam Keen says a casualty of war is our awake-ness to the humanity of others:

“War propaganda systematically eliminates the biography and the rich texture of individual human lives and reduces the other to ‘the enemy’ – a demonic or faceless stereotype that can be eliminated without qualms.” Sam Keen “To Love and Be Loved”.

Remembrance Day should awaken us to peace-making, not as a response to war, but as an alternative to unjust systems that contribute to creating the fear, anger, poverty, ambition that can contribute to war.

Awaken to seeing and affirming the sacred in everyone; awaken to redistributing wealth and resources so that creation is respected and everyone has enough without anyone having too much; awaken to a post-COVID world in which we affirm that we are a global community, that we are all brothers and sisters and all bearers of God’s presence.

There is no easy or one-dimensional way to create a world of peace, but we can begin with a vision of doors being opened, all being welcomed, and God declaring that, awakened to creation’s sacredness, we may all discover we are with Christ in paradise, with Christ in the heart of God. AMEN