

The Rev. Kate Byrd
11/12/2024

Joining in the Celebration

This past week I had the privilege and honor of preaching at All Saints in Roanoke Rapids, the church my Great Great Grandfather founded over a 120 years ago. And, I have to tell you that I was so thankful this opportunity was presented to me because it gave me a chance to look into my own family's history, and the history of the Rev. Francis Joyner, my Great Great Grandfather. While, of course he is a part of my family and our genealogical history, I never really knew much about him or (to be honest) even gave him much thought. When I went to seminary I think my grandmother (his granddaughter) mentioned that he had also gone to Virginia Theological Seminary, and when I was ordained my mother commented to my same grandmother how proud he would have been. But, other than that, I knew nothing of him. Only that he founded a church in the town my mother grew up in, and he lived a really really really long time ago. So, as I prepared to preach at All Saints for their homecoming I did a bit of digging to learn more. If for nothing else, so that I wouldn't look totally inept and out of the loop in the pulpit of the very church he founded.

In my research I found out that While my Great Great Grandfather grew up and lived in Littleton, North Carolina he spent much of his time traveling by horse and buggy around the Eastern part of our state, helping to sustain and plant various new churches. And, when at home, he spent much of his time reaching out to the African American community to support their pastors and allow the two communities to join together in prayer and support for one another. In fact, after his death, one of the ministers from the African American community wrote to Francis' friends and family stating,

As we think of Rev. Joyner, we think of one who gave his life for the cause he represented, Jesus Christ, he lived a life worthy of emulation. He was true to his profession without regard to race, color or creed. He believed that God in His wise plans created all men equal and that he proved as he walked the streets and entered the homes in the town of Littleton and elsewhere, rich or poor, high or low, black or white. Reverend Joyner made no exception. He took God with him everywhere he went.

The parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, that Jesus presents us with today is troubling. First off, where is the bride, I mean I've been to a few weddings in my day, and while the bridegroom is necessary, we all know who the real star of the show is. Second, what's taking him so long, did he get cold feet? Stay out too late carousing with his groomsmen? Or worse, did he forget? And lastly, when the bridegroom finally shows up to the main event, why won't the "wise" bridesmaids share with their "foolish friends"? Why so stingy? So seemingly selfish? So blatantly exclusive? With all of these disturbing aspects of our parable, I wonder what Jesus is

really trying to get at? Other than the fact that we will have to wait patiently and prepare for his coming again. But, I mean, we already knew that, it's been over two millennia since we last saw him, so... that's not shocking. Frustrating, maybe, but not shocking. What is it then that Jesus is getting at? What does it matter that we wait patiently, that we keep up our reserves, that we stay awake? How should it affect the way that we live and move and have our being in this day and age over two millennia later?

I think this parable, at least for me, is troubling because it feels like what Jesus is saying is that if we do not prepare (whatever that may mean) and if we aren't ready when the bridegroom finally does decide to show up, then we won't get to go to the party. But, I think there has to be more to it than that. Because, this is Jesus we are talking about. The one who said, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. The one who invites sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes to have a seat and break bread with him at the table. The one who heals whoever comes to him, with even the meagerest amount of faith. If anything, this parable reminds me of the urgency that Jesus demands from us. Because, while the second coming may not be tomorrow (or it may, who knows), that should not be the reason for us to prepare and stay awake.

I really loved learning about the Rev. Francis Joyner, and more so knowing that he was and is a part of our family, because it says something to me about where we have come from and where we are (hopefully) going. More so, it says to me something about what I believe it means to keep our lamps lit, our oil prepared and our wicks trimmed. It means looking towards all the ways we can live for the kingdom of God, not preparing for some party at the end, but finding ways to take part in the celebration today. By say reaching out to those in need, those who are too often overlooked, or worse those who have been forgotten. It means living our lives for God and one another by sharing what we have and who we are with the Divine who is present and living all around us. In this space, in each and everyone of you, in our community, and in the larger world. Begging for us to shine our lamps bright so that we can gather together, call others in, and join in the celebration that is ready and available if and when we realize that our preparation is not for us to enjoy salvation alone sometime in the future, but today with those around us. Remembering that all we have and all we are, is from the one who made us and loved us first. The one who invited us to the celebration, and calls us to participate by keeping our lamps filled with the spirit, and our wicks trimmed from distraction. So, today as we celebrate our ingathering the gift of all the pledges we have made to give of ourselves, our time and talent and treasure, may we recognize the myriad of ways we are taking part in the work and the celebration of the kingdom of God that is available, that is coming, and that calls us to keep awake and keep vigilant, to keep our lamps light and light shining so that we don't miss out on what is already all around us.