

**Reflection, November 11-12, 2017, 32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time
Saint Joseph's Parish**

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Well, it's that time of year. The time has changed. Sunset and nightfall approach ever earlier in the afternoon. Our November days are often gray, always cool and frequently wet. And the Church's liturgical cycle of readings calls us to remember those who have gone before and reminds us of the end times to come. Beginning last weekend, many of us have entered the names of loved ones in the book of Remembrance here in the church sanctuary. Some of us participated this weekend in a Remembrance Day ceremony, honoring the many that have died in war, particularly those in our armed forces, often young and filled with the promise of youth.

On Monday evening of this past week, I participated in L'Arche Ottawa's community night. In keeping with the season, all of us present were invited to remember loved ones who have died. One by one, the residents of each of our homes, people with disabilities and assistants, and other community members came forward and lit a candle or held up a photo or another memento of a parent, a family member, a former community member or a friend who we wished to remember. It was a simple but moving ritual reminding us of our connections to those we have loved and who have loved us. During that evening, I recalled three people from my life who died this summer, all during the month of August--my younger brother Dan and two L'Arche colleagues, Christiane and Paul.

For this week's scripture readings, the church has chosen a gospel passage that is often understood as warning us to always be ready, whether for Jesus' second coming at the end of time or for the moment of our death. This is surely correct, but what exactly is the story telling us? Jesus' hearers, when he told this story, would have been aware that oil in the Old Testament is a symbol of the Spirit of God that illumines our way. So having enough oil to keep your lamp burning until it is needed is really just another way of saying stay close to God and God's Spirit. In the story, Jesus shows the consequences of not doing so--the foolish virgins are locked out of the wedding feast; metaphorically, locked out of an eternal reward in paradise. But what can this mean in our lives today?

As I reflected on this question, I was drawn back to memories of my brother Dan and of my L'Arche colleagues Paul and Christiane. Did they live every day as though it could be their last one? Were they prepared, their lamps lit with enough oil to welcome Jesus in their final moments?

Were they ready when the Lord called them? And, of course, I began to ask these questions about myself. In my life, am I more like the wise virgins or more like the foolish ones?

So what is it that a wise person today would do to be prepared for the moment when Jesus comes, whether at the time of our own death or at the second coming? How should we live--as today might be our last day.

In trying to answer this question, it is helpful to note that today's Gospel passage comes as one of a series of teachings Matthew has collected together and presented as Jesus's final great public discourse. Just a few verses later, in a passage we will hear in two weeks, Jesus speaks explicitly of the final judgement. There, he says that those who will be welcomed into eternal life will be those who have acted to meet the needs of the weak and the vulnerable for food, clothing, friendship, dignity and so on. Jesus says, when you do these things for the least of my brothers you do them for me. So entering the Kingdom of Heaven on our last day will so natural, as, in some sense, we have lived in the kingdom all along.

It is of interest to note that in today's story, ALL of the young women fell asleep. None of them were perfect. However, the wise ones had prepared themselves so that when the time came to be of service to the bridegroom and the wedding party they were ready. It appears that the foolish ones, perhaps thinking mostly about themselves and the good time they would have at the wedding feast, neglected to prepare themselves to be of service when called upon. It seems to me that it is this sense that we are called to live wisely--to grow in our capacity and willingness to recognize occasions to serve others and then to actually do so.

Last August, as I joined together with my family to say farewell to my brother Dan, as I joined with my L'Arche friends and companions to give thanks for Paul and Christiane, I was reminded each time of the beauty of a life of service. Dan, Paul, and Christiane each served in their own unique and imperfect way--just as all of us do. Almost certainly they sometime failed to notice the presence of people or circumstances in their lives that called for service. But equally certain, often they did.

As we go forward this week, and as we enter into this final season of the church year, I invite each of us to notice the ways in which we are being called into service. I invite each of us to pray for the wisdom not only to notice, but also to act--to serve others, just as Jesus did.

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