



"Keep Awake"

Scripture – Matthew 25:1-13

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, September 26, 2021

"Only that day dawns to which we are awake." Thoreau. If we're up and dressed and had our jolt of caffeine we must be awake, right? But, of course Thoreau did not mean simply having our eyes open and going about our day. He was referring to being keenly aware of what is happening in the moment. He was talking about being acutely alert to what is going on around us knowing it will impact what is happening inside of us.

These days there is a lot of talk about being awake, although it usually goes by the name of mindfulness. Social psychologist and Harvard professor, Ellen Langer, has been called "the mother of mindfulness" and she has a simple and succinct definition. She says mindfulness is "the simple act of actively noticing things."¹

Being mindful, or awake, focuses your attention and fuels your thoughts. You can gaze at things you have seen dozens of times, but suddenly see them in a new light. Being awake allows you to become more present to what is happening in the moment. William James said, "Compared to what we ought to be, we are only half awake."

One of the ways to sharpen your spiritual life is to wake up – wake up to the grandeur of God's creation, wake up to the wisdom of Scripture, wake up to the beauty that surrounds us, wake up to the joy of existence, wake up to the divine love that envelopes you, wake up to the fleeting chance to touch the life of another.

Isn't it true that we often overlook or take for granted the things that are genuinely important? We become so caught up in our routines or the task before us or the depressing news that we overlook much that is rich and beautiful.

I am often anticipating what is to come next rather than being fully present in the moment. When I walk or run, I often catch myself thinking about finishing and what I'll do next, rather than soaking in the sights around me. Other times I need to remind myself to switch off the internal chatter that distracts me and to pause and to immerse myself in what is currently happening. I don't have to take a class on mindfulness or practice yoga. I need to remind myself to watch more intently because when you notice, it brings you into the present.

Writer, Pico Iyer, recalls an experience when he remembers suddenly being more deeply aware. He said, "the lens cap came off my eyes. Almost instantaneously I felt I had stepped into a richer, deeper life, a *real life* that I'd half-forgotten."²

Keep your eyes peeled for the quiet miracles that are so easy to overlook. Relish them. Remember them. Maybe it's that tree in your neighborhood you have walked past a hundred times but never really noticed its elephant feet trunk solidly planted on terra firma and its mighty branches reaching heavenward like arms lifted to pronounce a blessing. It could be the laughter and squealing of children playing nearby. Or it may be wagging tails of four-footed friends meeting at the dog park. What might catch your eye and slow your step and spark joy within you for the beauty that's hidden in plain sight?

Jesus said that ten bridesmaids carried their lamps to the place of the wedding banquet and waited for the bridegroom to escort them inside. Five had plenty of oil, but five were a bit short. While waiting for the bridegroom to appear, they all became drowsy and nodded off. When he finally arrived – much later than anticipated – it struck panic in five of the bridesmaids. The five who had an abundance of oil were set to go, but the five who were short on oil had to scamper off to procure more. The bridegroom and the five wise bridesmaids who were well-supplied marched into the wedding banquet. The other five were shut out of the festivities.

Traditionally, this parable has been interpreted as pointing to Jesus returning to earth at the end of time. In the first century, there was a heightened expectation that the world was coming to an end in the very near future and Jesus would show up again. But years passed, then decades, and the world did not go up in flames – and no Jesus. This parable seemed to encourage, or more rightly warn, people to remain faithful in the meantime, no matter how long the delay.

But if that was the chief point of the parable, then the statement by the bridegroom – who represents Jesus – should have been "Truly I tell you, *be prepared.*" But that's not what he says. Instead, he says, "*Keep awake.*"

That is a message for followers of Jesus in all times. Keep awake. Not for a single grand finale, but keep awake for Jesus showing up in different disguises. It cannot be a coincidence that just a few verses following this parable, Matthew tells us of Christ separating the faithful from the unfaithful. Do you remember what is it that distinguishes the two groups? Whether they were awake to Jesus coming in the form of people who are hungry or thirsty or ill or an outsider.

How awake are you at spotting Jesus in the guise of one who is in need or in the form of one who is helping someone in need?

Rodger, a Presbyterian minister, met with a group of young people and adults from cities around the country to plan a national youth conference. The meeting was held in New York. When their work was over, they stayed an extra day to tour the city together. One of the group was a high school senior named Kirk. He was a member of a small church outside of Bozeman, Montana where his family are ranchers. Kirk is 6'5" and easily 250 pounds. He is funny and kindhearted.

When Rodger picked him up at La Guardia, Kirk was wearing this white cowboy hat, western style shirt, and cowboy boots. Kirk confided to him that he had never been in such a large, diverse, and crowded city.

On their sightseeing day, Kirk said he'd like to stick with Rodger because he was a little afraid; he had heard that New York was a rough place. Rodger thought to himself, these people have more reason to be scared of you than you have to be scared of them.

When the group was walking to the subway, Rodger realized Kirk was waving at cars as they were going by. Rodger said, "Kirk, what are you doing?"

Kirk replied, "Well you know, Rodger, back home, folks warned me that New York City people aren't friendly. But this is just like being back home. At home, when you want to say 'hey' to someone, you just honk. Here, everyone is saying 'hey.' That's right nice."

Rodger said, "Kirk, they're not saying 'hey,' they're saying 'get out of the way.'"

Toward the end of the day, some of the group wanted to shop at Bloomingdale's, so everyone headed up there. Rodger, Kirk, and a few others stood outside the store on Lexington Avenue to wait and to watch people.

They were about mid-block and several of them noticed an older woman with a walker who started to make her way across. She was moving deliberately but slowly, and it soon became clear that she was not going to even get halfway across the six lanes before the light turned. Before any of them could do anything, a New York City sanitation worker who was emptying trash cans on the other side of the street ran out and put himself between her and the line of cars, held his hands up to stop the traffic, and guided her safely across. She patted his hand and kept going.

Kirk had been watching all of this and, as the worker was waiting to go back across the street, Kirk yelled out, "Hey, sir!" The sanitation worker looked around and realized Kirk was yelling at him. When Kirk saw that he had his attention, he yelled, "I saw what you did! Man, you rock!" And Kirk started cheering. Then, the rest of the group began cheering. Then other people on the street who had also seen what the man had done, cheered. At that, the man in the orange sanitation suit bowed to their applause. Then he ran across the street and jumped back into his truck to empty more trash cans. As he was driving away, he honked. Kirk looked at Rodger who said, "Now you can wave."

That night, the group shared their last evening prayers and reflections. When it came to Kirk's turn, he said he was going to tell his church in Montana that he saw Jesus in, of all places, New York City. Kirk said, "I'm telling them that Jesus is a big African American guy in an orange jumpsuit helping old ladies cross Lexington Avenue."³

Quiet miracles surround us, but they are easy to overlook. Unless you are wide awake.

NOTES

1. Ellen Langer interviewed by Krista Tippett, "Science of Mindlessness and Mindfulness," Onbeing.org, May 29, 2014.
2. Pico Iyer interviewed by Krista Tippett, "The Urgency of Slowing Down," Onbeing.org, June 4, 2015.
3. Rodger Nishioka, "Imagination: Seeing God," May 3, 2020.

Prayers of the People – Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of the galaxies, wisdom of the ages, and soft whisper within us, we do not invoke your presence, but rather acknowledge that you are always present – you are always present. Your Spirit both surrounds us and penetrates us, yet we are often blind to your movement in our midst and deaf to your urgings in our soul. We pray that we may clear the sleep from our eyes, disperse the incessant chatter from our brains, breathe deeply and slowly, and become fully awake to the gifts that bless us and the opportunities that beckon us.

Loving God, it is easy to walk past the beauty of the natural world without noticing and without allowing it to soak into our souls. It is easy to drive by littered low income neighborhoods without allowing the sight to change us. It is so easy to allow our anxieties to dominate our thoughts, obstacles to sour our emotions, and sorrows to

drive us to despair. May we learn to counter the troubles that drag us down with the ever-present joys that can lift our spirits and may we bring light and hope to people who struggle.

God of grace, may we not take for granted the life we have been given, but rather be quick to treasure the blessings of each day – each fleeting day.

May we learn to bathe in the beauty of the trees and flowers. May our ears be sensitive to the concerts the birds perform for our pleasure. May we remember to cherish our families and our friends. And may we be open to the strangers we encounter and alert to the gifts they have to offer.

Eternal God, though our years are brief, may our spirits be alive; though troubles assail us, may we face them undaunted. May we have the wisdom to embrace beauty and to create moments of joy, so that we may have the comfort of being in harmony with you and live valiantly in hope.

Now, hear us as we join our voices as one, praying the words Christ taught us, saying,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.