

I had the most emotionally moving and lengthy voting experience of my life this past Tuesday. The waiting line of people to go in and vote at my little rural polling place snaked around the length of the building about 4 times, went past an entire playground, another building, and a whole baseball diamond. I joined the line in the outfield of that baseball diamond, and was really grateful I wore comfy shoes as I took my place to have my voice heard in this election.

From the time I got out of my car to the time I cast my ballot, it took an entire hour. In the midst of that waiting, I decided to take the opportunity not only to enjoy the lovely weather, but also to observe the people around me, my neighbors, as it were. Fortunately everyone was outside and had plenty of distance between one another so I felt pretty safe. And I heard little bits of conversations as I stood - people checking in on their phones with work projects or spouses, talking to one another about people they knew in common, and even a bit about the presidential candidates. I saw paraphernalia from both major presidential candidates with the people around me, and yet the chatter flowed freely and pleasantly throughout my time in line.

About 40 minutes into my wait, I saw a couple pull up and park in one of the disabled parking spaces. As the woman got out of the car and leaned on her walker to help her, another woman about 4 people ahead of me in line brightened up and greeted her like an old friend. The woman and her husband both got out of the car with help from other equipment, the walker and the man had some sort of oxygen apparatus with him too. They stayed and chatted with the woman they knew ahead of me, and looked at the huge line behind us, and slowly made their way to take their place. But instead of trekking all the way back to that baseball diamond, a man about 5 people behind me insisted, no no, you two are coming here in line. Go ahead of me, you don't need to be in this line any longer than this. The couple were so grateful and smiled at the man, who they did not appear to know, and took their place. Not a single complaint came from anyone behind him in line.

And about five minutes later, a similar thing happened. A perfect stranger checked with the folks behind him in line and insisted that this couple come ahead of him so they could cast their ballots with as little struggle as possible. Again, they were incredibly grateful, and slowly made their way ahead in the line. Not a single person had an issue with welcoming this couple ahead of them in line. I don't think that couple waited more than 10 total minutes before they could cast their votes and make their voices heard by voting.

In the midst of such a divisive and high-stress and challenging time, these simple acts of loving care towards some neighbors in need really moved me. As I'm sure many of us are guilty of too these days, I don't always expect this kind of kindness or understanding from people I don't know. We are human, we have faults, it happens. But what happened in that moment was a setting aside of any ideological differences and instead the gathered body of people came together to support the least of us. This gathered body would not leave the one behind for the sake of the 99. The actions of the people around me warmed my heart and made me feel a little bit of hope again. There was concrete action taken to love our neighbors.

It would be really easy to take this election season and simply label people in dichotomous ways. And sometimes, because we are human and fall short in our love of God and neighbors, we root ourselves in one camp, and place harsh judgment on folks in the other camp. Yet all this does is further the division we find in our lives. In our Gospel text today, the bridesmaids are divided in just such a way - as being either foolish or wise.

The bridesmaids are divided by being called foolish or wise throughout this story, and these labels are given only because of this one aspect of themselves - whether or not they had oil for their lamps with them. The bridesmaids labelled as wise brought extra oil to fuel their lamps, the bridesmaids labelled as foolish went out to buy their oil later, once they realized they needed it. It is only in this one account that they are so labelled and divided, without any other context or nuance. However, the

bridesmaids are all part of this wedding party, they all have a place in the upcoming celebration.

What we learn later in the story is that it's the groom who both gives these labels to the bridesmaids, and the one who ultimately gives any sort of lasting judgment. It is the groom who knows the nuances, the contexts, who knows more beyond what just meets the surface of this one label or division.

The groom is a metaphor for God, gives us an understanding of God. Ultimately, God is the only one who provides any sort of lasting judgment on us, and transcends any division or label we try to put on each other. God is the one who can see past our human construction of limitation and division and give us another way. God is the one to whom we belong, and from whom we gain our worth and the truth of who we are.

And while God certainly provides judgment on our world, God is not an unapproachable or unloving or unjust God. The God who parted the Red Sea and led the enslaved Israelites from slavery into freedom is the same God who is called like a mother hen who tenderly holds her chicks in her wings. The God that has the power to raise Jesus from the dead is the same God that meets our grieving hearts with tenderness and care. The God who is our refuge and strength is also the God

All of these parts of God that we do know, and all the things about God we don't and never will understand, have a place in the kingdom of God. Our job is simply to respond out of this great love of God, with our faith and with our love in action.

Regardless of who sits in governmental power, there is still a lot of work to be done to bring the kingdom of heaven nearer to our world. Thousands of our siblings here in America and indeed around the world are dying and struggling from COVID-19. Our siblings of color are still being killed and discriminated against in alarming numbers and ways. Our siblings who have a wide array of sexual and gender identities also face alarming discrimination and hatred. Millions of people around the world do not have

access to the basic care of food, water, shelter, and safety that we all need to survive.

No matter how someone looks, how someone loves, identifies, struggles, or thrives throughout life, they are deserving of our love and actionable justice. The actions we take, in our everyday lives, in our neighbors around us, even the ones that seem really small, are the things that really make a difference. Yes, voting and fulfilling our civic responsibility is important and that is a concrete action we can take to further the Christian calling of love in our world. But that call to action, that call of Jesus to love God and love our neighbors, does not end when the election is done. That call of love extends to us every single day, in our daily dying and rising again by the power of Jesus Christ.

At the time I'm writing and recording this sermon, there is still not a clear winner of the presidential election. And time feels really sensitive in our readings today.

In the psalm, the author writes, "hasten to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O LORD, do not delay!". In the Gospel, Jesus says, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

We do not know the day or the hour when the votes of this election will all be counted, or when some winners will be declared. We do not know how things may or may not shake out in the future.

And we never know when or how God is going to show up for us - in fact, God often surprises us by showing up in some of the least-expected places in our lives. I certainly did not expect God to show up in the midst of a stressful presidential election, in the epitomal spot of divided thought, the literal line to vote, but I am happily surprised. God showed up in the actions of my neighbors in showing kindness and serving folks in need. God surprises us because God is beyond our understanding, and if we could always predict the ways God would show up in our lives, it simply wouldn't be God. God's actions and God's grace for us are the working of God alone, we simply receive the joyful gift of the happy and unexpected surprises of God's work in our world. Though we may feel like we are judged as foolish or wise like these bridesmaids, it is only God's work and

God's judgments and God's words that matter. God commands us to act in love, towards God and towards one another, and that authority of God, the one who created us, is the guiding light through which we are to live.

So friends, let's resist the temptation to divide each other and see one another through lenses of disagreement or difference. Let's remember that we are all created in God's image, in God's likeness, and out of the great and enduring love that God has for each and every one of us. We all have the power to take actions, even the tiniest of things, and these actions out of love and service for our neighbor are how we are able to live into our Christian callings. For these gifts of love and grace that we share with one another, and for the God who creates, unites, and provides justice and mercy for us all, we give unending thanks and praise. Amen.