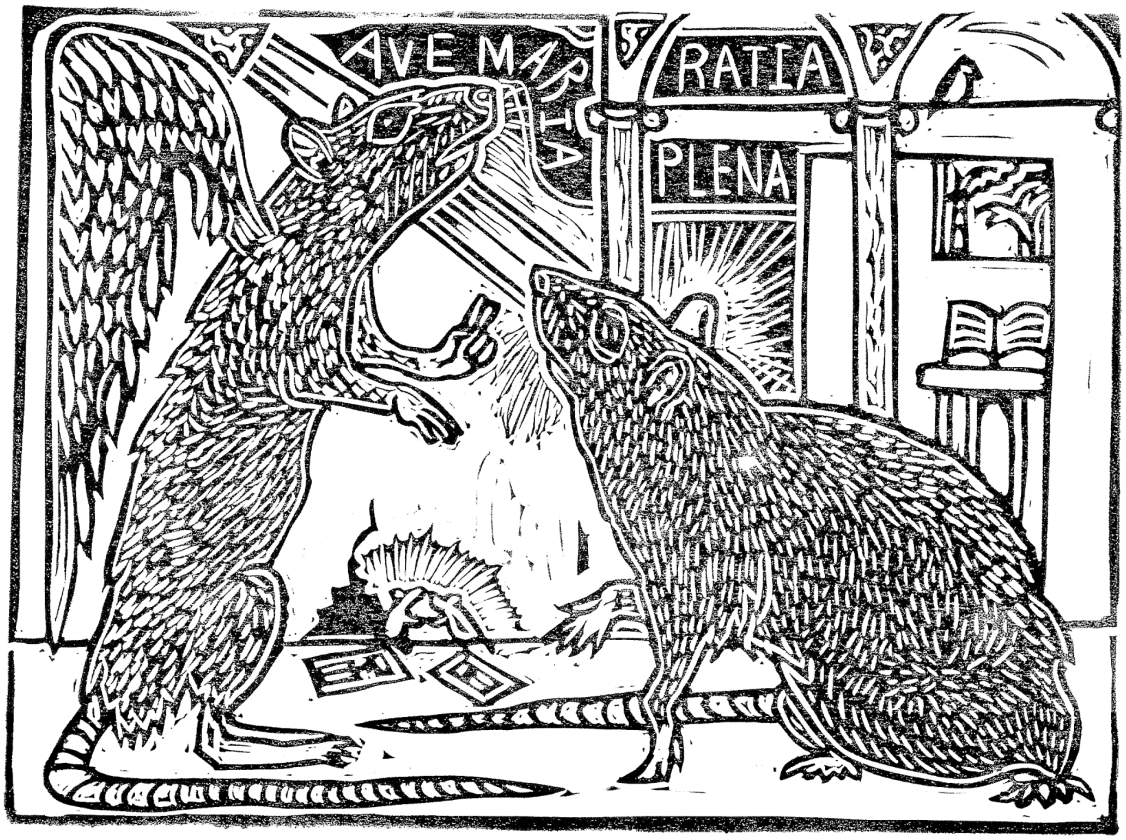

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**Parable of the Ten Virgins, a rat and postmodernity**

**Sermon for the Blessing of the Animals**
November 8, 2026
Rev. Diego Garrido Barreto
Matthew 25:1–13

*"...and went out to meet the bridegroom."*

Community, hola! It's been a long time. I missed you. Thank you for letting me join you as a congregant to preach about this parable. Did you miss me? Ay, well, it's been a weird season.

May the grace of God and their abundant love be with us. May we listen to what we need to hear, and may the words I say be filled with God's wisdom and not my own. Amen.

The parable for today tells the story of ten virgins, or bridesmaids. Five are foolish, and five are wise. In one modern translation, five are too caught up in the excitement of their outing, while the other five are sensible, good with details.

The writer of Matthew's Gospel uses two Greek words: *phronimoi* and *mōrai*. Wise and foolish. In this same Gospel, Jesus uses the word *phronimoi* when he tells his disciples to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. What does Jesus mean when he asks us to be like the five wise bridesmaids? Who is the bride-groom? And what kind of wisdom are we being invited to practice?

To understand the parable, I want to focus on the five wise ones. First, this parable appears in the final chapters of Matthew, as Jesus approaches his passion and death. We are approaching a time of uncertainty, of waiting, of transformation. In some sense, we understand what the parable asks of us: to be ready, to prepare. We know that the five wise bridesmaids represent something we should aspire to become. But what does it mean to be *phronimoi*, to be wise?

This Greek word has a connection to the world of classical philosophy. Aristotle identifies 4 forms of intellectual virtue, including technical knowledge, , episteme, philosophical wisdom, and *phronesis*: practical wisdom. And it is practical wisdom that interests me today.

Practical wisdom is not simply knowing what the rules are. It is knowing how to live, how to discern, and how to respond when the rules alone do not give us an answer.

For example, Dr. Lisa Cosgrove and Dr. Allen Shaughnessy write about becoming a *phronimos* and the role of practical wisdom in primary care. They argue that medicine requires more than evidence, diagnoses, and clinical guidelines. It also requires the ability to pay attention to the particular person and circumstances before us.

There are rules, norms, research, and evidence. All of these matter. But practical wisdom asks us to use that knowledge with judgment, empathy, and attention.

Community, we do not have a manual for living. And even if we did, Unitarians have a bad reputation for organizing a committee for living. Practical wisdom means reflecting on the information we receive instead of immediately forcing it into a category. I wonder whether we, as Unitarians, can relate to this way of being. And I believe we can.

We have inherited a religious tradition that invites us to question, to examine, to reconsider, and to look again. But questioning alone is not wisdom. Practical wisdom is what these virgins did to wait for the bridegroom. Sadly, these women never advocated for the ones who ran out of oil. They could have said, wait, the other five are getting oil and will return from the village, no, they came to the wedding and the gate was closed.

For the art piece for today I brought you a test for our practical wisdom. I want to ask whether we are willing to see something differently or if our oil has run out of curiosity.

I want to invite you all to practice this kind of wisdom while looking at this painting. Do not let your categories define what you see. Instead, I invite you to be curious. To suspend, for just a moment, your assumptions about what religious art should look like. To analyze without diagnosing. Because today, my friends, we are going to find God in rats.

Yes. Rats.

The image you see in your order of service is *The Annunciation* of Fra Angelico, a Dominican friar and painter of the Italian Renaissance. The image

you see in the altar is my *Rat Annunciation*, a linocut I made last month, inspired by this annunciation.

Some of you may remember that when Rev. Mark and I sent envelopes with a short message to members of our congregation. Mark suggested that I include a small linocut. Most of you got either a Rat Bishop or a Rat Monk. That same Sunday, a beloved congregant stopped me at the door, just before entering church, and said: "Diego, you sent me this. What does it mean?" And I said: "I want you to have this Rat Bishop so you may never run out of cheese. And whenever you feel sad, may that Rat Bishop remind you that there are plenty of reasons to have cheese." Like a blessing, and I was being serious.

I made this art to imitate the Renaissance, but also my own style. I wanted to create a religious image to invite me into prayer. Because I cannot pray to an image that does not invite me. I wanted to find God in rats, just as rats carry a piece of God. In my *Rat Annunciation*, Mary curves her belly, as I imagine Jesus being invited to come into the world. The angel gives her a blessing, his hand is up. There are two small rats near the cracks in the wall. They represent Adam and Eve, exiled from paradise, standing close to mousetraps. These traps remind us of sin, danger, and death. And then there is the Holy Spirit. A Holy Cheese floating and emanating yellow American cheese light. A piece of cheese descending from heaven, with holes, blessing Mary's conception. Two other pieces of cheese appear in the architecture, making a secret three. A trinity of cheese, if you wish.

I kept the arches and architectural elements of Fra Angelico's painting, but transformed them as a metaphor to explain Postmodernity. In Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*, Mary is pale, with rosy cheeks and golden hair. She bows her head in reverence before the angel. But, community, I struggle to find her in that pale skin. The mother of the man I follow, Jesus, belongs among the oppressed, the lowly, and the humble. She belongs to those who are rejected, feared, and pushed to the margins. And therefore, in my imagination, I represented her as a rat. It is my attempt to recognize her in my own reality.

In Fra Angelico, the angel and Mary bow toward each other, their bodies forming a beautiful movement of reverence. In my painting, Rat Mary raises her gaze. She looks through the angel toward the Holy Cheese.

Her acceptance of the mystery of incarnation comes by seeing, questioning, and encountering what is before her. For this Blessing of the Animals Sunday, if a dove is a suitable representation of the Holy Spirit, why is a rat not? Why do we bless our animals and yet reject others who share this world with us?

Sure, rats can carry diseases. And that is why Practical wisdom means that we can love God's creation without forgetting to be prepared with oil, to be ready, to be wise.

And this is almost the final sermon in our series on art. Over these past months, we have traveled through centuries of art. We began in the Middle Ages, with a vision of the cosmic Christ, surrounded by an ordered universe. Then into the Renaissance, with the *School of Athens*, classical Greek philosophy moved us to a more humanistic focus. In Caravaggio's *Calling of Saint Matthew*, remember Jesus who enters a darkened room and a small beam of light. In Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence*, we encountered the emergence of a nation, with all its ideals, and contradictions. No darkness or any dusty spot. Then came Romanticism, represented by Blake's painting of Jesus and the adulterous woman, in a world after the French Revolution where imagination resisted the limits of an industrialized and rational society. Then we moved to Van Gogh, whose colors and brushstrokes were less realistic and more vivid. The *Christ the Redeemer* in Rio de Janeiro is not a crucified Jesus, but a concrete God that welcomes tourists and locals with arms extended over a modern city filled with Bossa Nova. Finally, on Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*: a diner at night, surrounded by darkness, where people are alone, they are also together. A God with the taste of a black coffee.

In all these paintings something changes. The symbols changed. Where we expect to find God changes too. Our understanding cannot keep medieval standards, nor humanistic or romantic values. It is practical wisdom that we prepare for a God who changes with us. And the world might be dark and gloomy, but each one has an oil lamp you should put to use.

So what is postmodernity? Where is God after Auschwitz? After Hiroshima and Palestine? How do we speak about a loving God in a society traumatized by free and open love? How do we speak about God with a book written for oil lamps, virgins and parables? Where are we?

We cannot simply return to the God of a perfectly ordered medieval universe. Nor can we assume that the elaborate religious images of the Renaissance and Baroque will speak in the same way. Even our ideas of reason, freedom, and progress, so important to the Enlightenment and the founding of this nation, have shown us their nightmares.

Postmodernity, the rejection of everything that came before us, is an invitation to recognize the cracks of the wall, the watering down of our institutions, the rats behind every bright illuminated kitchen, hall, empire or holy of holists. Rats are reminders that God is not the bright golden symbol, but in the practical wisdom of cheese. That cheese can talk about the fullness of God just as much as an annunciation made on the Reinaissance.

Practical wisdom is found closer to the person who gets up in the morning, makes the bed, prepares breakfast, and continues living —not because of a celestial reward, but because caring for life is the closest we are to holiness.

Even when we cannot see the whole picture, I want to invite the oldest among us to trust in the younger generations to come and let them paint the next layers. Ours, beloved Unitarians, ours is a God of a painting we haven't finished. Beloved Unitarian Universalist, ours is a God that invites us to be practical, less attached to the norms. Save enough oil for your lamps, even when we all fall asleep, because foolish and wise, the gospel doesn't mention sharing this oil. The ten women of this gospel were not awake all night, but only five had enough oil and were prepared.

Let us be a church that opens doors. Let us be a church where the celebration is weekly, and the bridegroom marries us again and again. Let us be a church where there is enough oil to share and the bridegroom waits for the other five virgins that were late. Let us be a more practical, more wise church, where we cannot always be borrowed at the last minute, but a community where the oil of our lamps can be cultivated together.

Community, we do not know what the future will bring. A few days ago it was blue, and I hope that color persists. But let us not forget the night persists. Stay together, pray for one unto another, share your oil and let us wait for our beloved bridegroom.

May we never run out of cheese.  Amen.