

"Watching and Waiting"

Matthew 25:1-13

November 12, 2017

25¹⁻⁵ "God's kingdom is like ten young maidens who took oil lamps and went out to greet the bridegroom. Five were silly and five were smart. The silly maidens took lamps, but no extra oil. The smart maidens took jars of oil to feed their lamps. The bridegroom didn't show up when they expected him, and they all fell asleep.

6 "In the middle of the night someone yelled out, 'He's here! The bridegroom's here! Go out and greet him!'

7-8 "The ten maidens got up and got their lamps ready. The silly maidens said to the smart ones, 'Our lamps are going out; lend us some of your oil.'

9 "They answered, 'There might not be enough to go around; go buy your own.'

10 "They did, but while they were out buying oil, the bridegroom arrived. When everyone who was there to greet him had gone into the wedding feast, the door was locked.

11 "Much later, the other maidens, the silly ones, showed up and knocked on the door, saying, 'Master, we're here. Let us in.'

12 "He answered, 'Do I know you? I don't think I know you.'

13 "So stay alert. You have no idea when he might arrive.

I once was a guest at a wedding that didn't happen. Dutifully appearing at 1:30 for a 2:00 wedding, I took a seat and greeted those nearby, some of who I knew, and some of who I guessed how they were connected to one side or the other of the wedding party. The bride and the groom had both been friends of mine for many years, and I knew that they had dated steadily for well over two years prior to their engagement.

My female friend was so excited for her wedding day to arrive. She had made all the arrangements carefully. She was the one to send out all the invitations, to hire the minister, the caterers, and the musicians, too. She had written the ceremony herself. She had suggested to the bridegroom the names of the attendants, and the color scheme of what all should wear to the blessed event. All he was required to do was show up and say, "I do."

On my way to the event, I was happy for the couple and looking forward to the ceremony and the party to follow. I was able to get a seat where I had a clear view of the front where the wedding party would be to exchange their vows. At 1:45, there was some stirring in the back room. We could hear some raised and anxious voices, though we couldn't make out the words. There was a buzz in the guest section, as we all wondered what possibly could be going on!

At 2:00, there was a steady buzz in the wedding venue, and some bridesmaids and groomsmen, sporting worried looks, were walking quickly from the dressing rooms to the far reaches of the venue, and back again. The groom, we learned, had not yet arrived, and no one had heard from him.

By 2:10, the collective worrying intensified. Everyone's anxiety was fully evident. Had something happened to the groom? Could anyone reach him on a cellphone? Had anyone been able to reach him? And by 2:30, panic started to set in, the minister became impatient, the musicians were playing their backup pieces, the bride-to-be was furious and crying in the back room, and the groomsmen and parents were all standing around talking together in low whispers.

At 3:15, we all left. The minister was paid, and he left, too. Still no groom, still no call. I can only imagine what the bride was feeling by this time. Nobody knew what had happened to her husband-to-be, but there didn't appear to be any reason to wait any longer. The venue had only been reserved for the hour; the caterers were set to serve the banquet meal, and they were also charging by the hour. The scene was chaos. I felt so bad for the bride.

We do not wait well anymore. We are used to instant everything: instant communication, instant news, instant food, instant

information. Our days are scheduled to the last hour, packed, and overlapping with competing claims for our attention.

The wedding that day was scheduled for 2:00 pm precisely and the reception was to start at 2:30 pm and last until 5:30. This is very different from weddings that were held in Jesus' day. In his community, the invited guests would be expected to assemble at the bride's home, and they would be entertained by her parents for a time while waiting for the groom. When he at last arrived with his entourage, the bridesmaids and guests would go out from the bride's home to greet him with lit torches illuminating his way to his bride. It was a beautifully symbolic ritual of the final courtship.

Then, in a festive procession, the guests would accompany the bride and groom to his home. There, the wedding itself would take place and the groom's parents were expected to entertain their guests. They would prepare an extended banquet to follow the wedding ceremony, a banquet which lasted not for a few hours, but rather, for a *few days*.

That's right. You heard me right. The wedding banquet would go on for *days*. It was such a big deal that the whole community suspended their normal routines for it. They carved out not some limited time in the middle of their work day or in the middle of doing their daily household chores, but rather they would devote *days* in

which to celebrate the blessed event. Timekeeping was irrelevant. Nothing took priority over the wedding and the after-party.

We do not honor the passage of marriage that way anymore, not in this country, not in our American tradition. If the wedding is scheduled for 2:00, the guests are anticipated to arrive in the preceding hour. The wedding party is expected to mind the rules of convention, to arrive plenty early, and be ready for the centerpiece ceremony at the appointed hour. All gather in the designated place and the wedding moves forward in front of the guests in a very expected way.

But Jesus, teaching his followers through parables, turns their expectations and schedules on their heads. In the parable that appears in the text right before this one, a kitchen "master" returns to the workplace sooner than expected and finds the servants abusing their power. They are "abusing the help and throwing drunken parties for his friends." Jesus warns that it will not go well for these persons; they will "end up in the dump with the hypocrites, out in the cold, shivering, teeth chattering."

Jesus is a tricky preacher. He warns his disciples that, although he will be going away from them, he will return at a time and hour that

no one knows, and at that time, they better be ready to account for their actions during his absence; they better be ready with their lamp oil and reserves. It may be sooner, or it may be later, but it *will* happen.

Matthew is preaching to his own choir, it seems. Waiting, waiting for the Messiah to return for the Christian remnant of the first century, he is writing to those he sees are unprepared for the coming of the kingdom of God. Watching, watching the Christian religion struggle under the weight of Roman oppression, in the shadow of legalistic definitions of faithful practice, he is writing to those who are losing patience, losing faith that Jesus will return in their lifetimes as promised. Praying, praying, Matthew is attempting to equip his soldiers of the faith with the hope and the dedication and the spiritual reserve to outlast the naysayers and the nonbelievers.

But Jesus doesn't come back! It's been over two thousand years and Jesus has not come back, so why should we bother to be prepared? Why should we read these ancient texts, since they obviously had it all wrong?

These are legitimate questions for faithful people. Personally, I don't believe in the theology of the Second Coming. That doesn't mean that you can't, but I don't. So, let me just put that out there right

here and now. I don't believe in the Apocalyptic reading of the Book of Revelation. I don't believe that Jesus will be coming back to grab from damnation some righteous good Christians who accept him as their personal Lord and Savior, who go to church every week, read their Bible daily, pay their tithes to the church dutifully, and confess their wretchedness openly, seeking forgiveness and salvation. I don't.

Yes, I think our lives will be enhanced and will mean something more if we believe in the divine goodness of God within us and within everyone else. I think our lives will be enriched by a spiritually and communally diverse church experience. I think that studying the Bible—its context and its open-ended questions—helps us to have a deeper appreciation for God, for the life and sacrifice of his life chosen by Christ, and for the enduring healing nature of God's Holy Spirit.

I think this church will be sustained in a meaningful and communal way only if everyone donates to the missions and ministry here with their time, their talent, and their treasure. I know I have experienced that giving some of my money away actually makes me wealthier in ways I can't quantify in my checkbook register. It feels good to be an integral and contributing member of a church family that is living out the Gospel message in spite of all the arguments of the sceptics.

I think we need to understand where our faith and our discipleship runs short without the sustaining energy of God and God's

grace. We can't go it alone; we need to be living in the question of God so that we can continue to spiritually grow and so that we may inspire others to join the Gospel's wedding and banquet.

I think forgiveness is what I should give more freely than I seek it, especially from God. And I see evidence of salvation every single day in this world, in my life, and in your stories that have brought you to this place here and now. I have no time to worry about what happens when I die; the bridegroom is here now, in my heart and in my mind, and just beyond the door. I need to make sure the lamp lights the darkness that is just beyond my fingertips, right here and right now.

That's a part of my theology—it doesn't have to be yours. This is my interpretation of the parable—it doesn't have to be yours. This is my interpretation of the symbol of light and the light-bearer's responsibility in illuminating the world for people afraid of the darkness.

My friend, the groom, indeed got cold feet. He wasn't ready to be married that day; his torch did not have the necessary fuel to light the way for his bride-to-be's procession to the marriage place. Eventually, with more preparation, more prayer, and more faith

in the vows he was to speak to her, he did place the ring on her finger and say with conviction, "I do."

And I think that's what God really wants of us. I think that's what Jesus was saying to his followers in this parable. I think the message is that we should not commit to Christianity lightly, without great thought and preparation. We never know when we will be called to be the world's light bearer, so we need to constantly be filling our lanterns with the oil of faith, with the oil of devotion, and with the oil of investment in the sacred, in those life-giving connections—such as church— that we know we need in our lives.

Theologian John Buchanan states it this way, "Christian hope is as big as the whole sweep of human history, but also as small as each individual."

I hope you feel that this church body—this place, these people, this message, and this unqualified welcome—is one of the soul-fired torches you need to light your path in life. I hope you will not spend your time idly waiting for Jesus to come back to earth and fix everything that is cattywampus here, for you are the Jesus-light already. You are the Jesus-light needed right here and now. You are the Jesus-light that others are straining to see today in the dark.

May It Be So.