

November 12, 2023

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Matthew 25:1-13

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A few years back, there was a bumper sticker that was popular. Do you remember this one: “Jesus is coming! Look busy!” That comes to mind, as we study the passage from Matthew today. This passage urges right action, while waiting in hope for a messiah to come and set things right.

The early church believed and hoped, in the imminent coming of the messiah, the anointed one. The beginning of Matthew 25 is one of the parousia parables. “Parousia” from Greek, referred to the time when the Messiah would come. Parousia stories included, the burglar at night; the wise slave, waiting for the master; and the parable of judgment following today’s passage, in Matthew 25.

These are stories of crisis, warning people to be prepared for a sudden change. The passages urge watchfulness, and right behavior. “Be awake, and be ready!” How do you ready for the crisis? We have a clue, found at the end of Matthew 25, in the parable of the king separating the sheep from the goats. In that parable, the people ask the king: “When did we see you, Lord?” The king answered: “When you fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger; visited the imprisoned—you saw me.” For followers of Jesus, being ready means acting in compassion and mercy.

This parable of the five wise and five foolish bridesmaids (like many parables) raises more questions than answers. For example: Where’s the bride? Why do some of the bridesmaids forget their extra oil? Why won’t the other bridesmaids share their oil? How can they be considered wise, when they won’t share? Why is the bridegroom so late?

To try to understand, I turned to a classic book to help understand this parable. It’s by Joachim Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus. Though he published the book in 1954, he describes a 1906 Arab Palestinian wedding in Jerusalem: After the day has been spent in dancing and other entertainments, the wedding feast takes place at nightfall. There is activity happening in three houses. During the late evening, the guests were entertained in the bride’s house. The bride is then accompanied with torches to the bridegroom’s house. Finally, after a long wait, a messenger announces the coming of the bridegroom, who had to keep outside the house; the women leave the bride alone and go with torches to meet the groom. After hours of waiting for the groom, at last he came, half an hour before midnight, to fetch the bride. He was accompanied by his friends, floodlit by burning candles, and received by the guests who had come out to meet him. The wedding assembly then moved off, again in a flood of light, in a festal procession to the house of the bridegroom’s father. There, the marriage ceremony and fresh entertainment took place. Both the reception of the bridegroom with lights and the hour long waiting for the grooms’ arrival are frequently mentioned in modern reports of Arab weddings in Palestine (according to Jeremias.)

Many scholars believe that Jesus was actually describing a real wedding that happened, including bridesmaids that left early to get more oil for their torches. So, what is the message in this for us today?

Well, I'm going to offer one interpretation of this parable, that focuses on the joyous celebration of the wedding. One way to read this story is that Jesus was referring to the kingdom of heaven as a joyous event that some people miss. In this case, the missing out happened to the bridesmaids who ran out of oil for their torches. The bridesmaids' part in the celebration was to provide light for the celebration. Though all the bridesmaids (the wise and the foolish) fell asleep, five of them left the party too soon. Maybe it would have been fine, if the women had just stuck around, without extra oil, with darkened torches. They'd not have missed the groom, and the continuing party. But, as it was, they left, and they missed out. (And by the way, I don't think the "wise" bridesmaids are meant to be role models. They didn't model kindness or sharing. They did manage to stay at the party, though.)

What's the big picture here? What does this parable say about missing out on the joy of the kingdom of heaven? Can we keep oil in our lamps, can we keep our candles lit, and flood the midnight darkness with light to celebrate? Could this parable be about patience and persistence? Waiting. . .Waiting in the dark, trusting what comes next?

Can we be ready for unknown future, by choosing a way now, of kindness, trust and compassion?

We bring light, when we are patient, when we trust, and we are loving others in concrete ways.

The kingdom of heaven is like those who sit and wait in uncertainty, trusting that joy will be theirs, maybe even in unexpected ways. Maybe this parable has to do with how we wait. . .

This week the church Council will be voting on the Mission Site Profile in order for the Search Committee to begin to receive resumes for the next pastor. Okay-- there are jokes about Pastor Search Committees looking for a candidate who can walk on water. And it did cross my mind when reading today's passage that waiting for the next pastor may at times feel a little like waiting for the messiah.

In reality though, at St. Andrew, you embody what it means to be a priesthood of all believers. Walk into this building on any particular day at St. Andrew, and you'll see people bringing food to share with others; doing Tai Chi or yoga, or in meetings to help support the immigrant families; meetings to plan worship, meetings to teach; meetings to care for the facility and ministries that care for those who are grieving, and those who are homebound. Yes, we are a priesthood of believers.

But still—there is a long wait between called pastors. Should you stick around, even if your oil is running a little low? Or should you leave the party for a while and come back, later? If you worship with the St. Andrew, but haven't become a member, you may be holding back wondering—what's the next pastor going to be like? Or maybe you think of donating to the ministry of the church, we want to see—what will the ministry direction be. . .will the new pastor change the way of worship here? What will the sermons be like?

Or maybe waiting in the darkness for you is more about our national and world issues. Waiting to see what the congress will do, or how the next Presidential election goes. Maybe you are anxious about how things will unfold with people who have different, strong views. Will our democracy survive? Yes, sometimes it feels that we are near midnight, waiting for the groom to arrive. We'd like to celebrate, but we're running out of oil. It's crisis time!

Friends, here's the true wisdom about waiting and being ready. Worry and anxiety about our present and future, can be paralyzing. But, as followers of Jesus, we are called to compassion and trust. We are called to welcome the stranger, to visit the imprisoned, to feed the hungry. Here's an interesting, almost magical thing: When we act in kindness and compassion, the amazing result is that our action causes us to feel more hope. Then, we are more able to wait, in trust.

I want to close with the true story of a small act of kindness and generosity. In our neighborhood, lots of children come for trick-or-treating. Some houses give out full size candy bars, and the Halloween decorations are elaborate! I live in fear on October 31, of running out of candy too fast. . . It's easy to underestimate how much candy you need. My neighbor told me a heartwarming story from this past Halloween night. She had to turn away a group of trick or treaters after she ran out of candy. When she showed her empty bowl to the group being turned away, two young girls, who looked to be about four, and two, came up the steps, anyway. They took candy from their own bags and dropped the candy into the empty bowl.

I'd say, that was the best response to the crisis.

Watch, be ready, and respond with compassion. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like.