

What Are You Waiting For?

Matthew 25:1-13

November 12, 2017

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

*Title Slide Up

25 Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids* took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.* 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." 7 Then all those bridesmaids* got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." 9 But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids* came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." 12 But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Weddings are loaded with opportunities for mishap and even disaster. This may seem like a horrible way to look at a celebration of the love between two human beings, but in situations which are so full of emotion and so packed with details that, in some cases, the bride has been planning for decades, the likelihood of error is high. In preparation for today's sermon on this text about a wedding, and for my own entertainment, I asked some of my clergy friends to share a few stories of wedding gone awry with me.

In one story, the bride forgot the rings and realized it as she was standing in the narthex of the church, waiting to walk down the aisle. In the words of my friend, "She freaked out." She ran to her mom, who was about to be escorted to her seat by an usher, and screeched, "The rings are in the medicine cabinet," loud enough for everyone in the sanctuary to hear. The same colleague shared that at another wedding the bride's cousin was the vocalist and came to the rehearsal, did a fine job, and then didn't show up on the day of the wedding, no call...nothing.

Another friend has had so many wedding mishaps in her years of ministry, she made a list for me:

Grooms hyperventilating

Bride shaking so badly she had to be supported in order to walk down the aisle

Groomsman passed out and falling to the ground

*Ring bearer getting halfway down the aisle and then turning around running, screaming, back the other way.

Flower girl puking up front

The flower girl puking reminded me of a wedding I was in when I was 5. I was the flower girl. I wore a pretty white dress with little pink daisies on the waistband. Before the wedding the cute little ring bearer gifted me a box of chocolate turtles which the two of us consumed while we were waiting for the wedding to start. Our fingers were all chocolatey when we were finished. He wiped his on his black tuxedo pants. I wiped mine on the front of my white dress.

Another friend said that at the first wedding she officiated, she said the wrong last name at the end when she presented the newly married couple to the congregation.

I officiated a wedding in which the bride said many, many times in the planning process that the most important thing about the day for her was to start the ceremony on time. I assured her that if she and the groom were ready, we would start on time. The day of the wedding arrived, I was at the church an hour before the wedding was to start. Everything was going along perfectly. I came out of my office about 5 minutes before the wedding was to start and peeked in on the bride---all was well. I went to check on the groom and on my way had to pass the entrance to the sanctuary. There was a line to get in...a long line, probably 75 people. I went to the front of the line to see what the hold-up was and found that the guest book had been divided into sections. One section for each letter of the alphabet. The bride wanted the guests to sign-in according to the first letter of their last names. I quietly announced to the line that the guest book would be available at the reception and to please be seated. We started on time.

*In the parable I read today from Matthew 25, Jesus, talking to his disciples, used a familiar setting to talk about the kingdom of God. Like weddings today, weddings in the first century Palestinian world were fraught with emotion and a high margin for error. And, like the weddings I referenced from today, everything at this particular wedding didn't go perfectly.

Guests would have assembled at the home of the bride and would have been entertained by her parents while waiting for the bridegroom. As he approached, the guests, including the bridesmaids, would have, lamps lighted, gone out to greet him. When he arrived, everyone would have processed together to the groom's family home where his parents were waiting. That would have been where the ceremony and the banquet would have happened.

In the story, the guests were waiting at the bride's home and the groom was delayed (mishap number 1). Can you imagine the anxiety? What was the problem? Had he changed his mind? Anyway, they waited. The bridesmaids fell asleep, presumably with their lamps burning. They woke up when someone called out, "He's coming!" They grabbed their lamps, trimmed the wicks, and then mishap number 2 is illuminated. 5 of the bridesmaids, the "foolish" ones, had used their lamp oil waiting and were unprepared for the bridegroom's arrival. The 5 "wise" bridesmaids, prepared with extra oil for their lamps, didn't have enough to share.

The "foolish" bridesmaids were told, basically, to find a 24-hour QT and get some more oil. The rest of the wedding party and guests processed with the groom to his house for the ceremony and banquet. By the time the "foolish" bridesmaids showed up there, the door was closed and even when they appealed to the bridegroom to let them in, they were turned away.

This story was written down in a time when early Christians were wrestling with the fact that Jesus had not returned as they had expected. They, like the bridesmaids, were waiting. They were waiting for Jesus to return, to fulfill their belief that he would bring about the political and spiritual redemption of the people. His return would end hatred and violence, bring all the Jewish exiles home to Israel, and end sin forever. They thought that would happen in their lifetime. It was the thing for which they hoped and waited.

The heart of our faith is the certainty that human history has a purpose and a goal and that, whether we can see it or not, eventually God's desire for the world will be fulfilled. We believe God's desire for the world is wholeness or in Hebrew, shalom. We believe that ultimately all human beings will be safe, free, sheltered, sure of their

worth, children will not be hungry, everyone will have clean water, wars will cease, violence will end, and God's love will reign. That, friends, is the kingdom of heaven that Jesus talked about. And that is what we are waiting and hoping for.

The thing that made the "foolish" bridesmaids "foolish", the only difference between them and the "wise" bridesmaids was their preparation for the waiting. Neither group was hyper vigilant, the kind that today might claim to have special knowledge proclaiming, "the end is near, stay alert." On the contrary, both groups fell asleep. They all brought lamps and oil. The story doesn't mention a difference in attitude. Maybe they were patiently waiting maybe not--clearly attitude was not the issue. They were all excited and popped right up to greet the bridegroom when his impending arrival was announced. The only difference...was preparedness for the possibility of waiting.

In the waiting, the story tells us, we ought to do the things that keep the presence of God, symbolized by oil and lamps that are lit, before us. The point is living expectantly and hopefully. Our hope rests in the God that created the world, continuing to love and create, until at last the project is complete. Christian hope is as big as the whole sweep of human history, but also as small as each individual. Our hope is in our God who continues to break into this world through human beings who choose to be oil-filled lamps in this world. It is through each of us offering more than "thoughts and prayers" in the face of all that is wrong in the world.

God breaks into this world when we live in hope, never giving up on the vision that God has called us to. In our world today, that looks like continuing to learn about God's vision, by reading, talking, sharing, and being in community with other people who are seeking

God's vision. It looks like casting our votes for the ones who can articulate a vision of a nation where nobody is kept outside and designated "the other", where everyone belongs, and where legislation is passed that places value on people, specifically the most vulnerable people.

God breaks into this world when we express love and compassion and refuse to accept injustice. In our world today, that looks like embracing people who do not look like we do, standing with people of color, calling out racism, including and valuing our neighbors whose families look different from ours, proclaiming that love wins no matter what. It looks like refusing to accept that war is a necessity and recognizing that, part of the cost of war is in caring for our veterans. It is securing our nation by using our resources to make sure every person has healthcare and every child is educated, rather than buying more weapons of mass destruction.

God breaks into this world when we know that all people are ultimately safe because nobody is outside of God's love and there is nowhere we can go where God is not. In our world today, that looks like an open communion table where everyone is welcome, no exceptions, that looks like learning from other faith traditions and recognizing that God reveals Godself to each of us in different ways at different times and that is something to celebrate.

God breaks into this world when we fully give ourselves to the work of bringing about the kin-dom of God here and now. In our world today, that looks like YOU. It looks like you who make your voices heard in a community where God's love and radical inclusion is not the dominant voice. It looks like you who love and care for the most vulnerable people in our community---the ones who need transportation (you provide our church van); the ones who struggle

to provide Thanksgiving dinner for their families (you give sweet potatoes and partner with other churches so these families can enjoy a special meal with the ones who are special to them); the ones who don't have homes to go to (you support Family Promise with your money and your hospitality when they come to stay here); the ones who have been told at other churches they are welcome, but when they get there find that they can't be in leadership, teach Sunday School, or get married in their building, by their minister (you say to them All means All, you belong here). It is YOU, who day after day, refuse to give up on and lose hope for, true Shalom.

Last, I want to say a few words about the two parts of this story that have always troubled me.

*First, the final scene...the closed door. That part of the story has never set with me very well, especially in light of passages like Matthew 7:7, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." This is what I have come to know. The reality is, at some point, our opportunities to be light in this world will be over. Our wait here will end. Whatever we didn't get to will remain undone. So, if there are broken relationships in your life, and you are thinking that someday you need to do something about them, I say to you, be light. If there are things you have the skills to change or you could acquire the skills to change them, be light. If you think following the ways of Jesus might not be a bad way to spend your life, follow him, be light. I want to be clear, though, I do not believe that our missed opportunities and mistakes have any bearing on our place for all eternity. There is nobody outside God's reach...in life or death.

The other troubling part of the story for me has been the "wise" bridesmaids' refusal to share their oil with the ones who were out of oil. According to the author's telling of the story, it's ok not to share.

How can that be? Aren't we supposed to share? Pragmatically, if the bridesmaids had shared their oil, they all would have had oil for a while, but eventually, the oil would have been gone and none of them would have had oil. The thing is, we are each a unique manifestation of the light of God. We each have our own purpose, our own light to shine. I can't shine your light and you can't shine mine. We can walk together for a while, using the light from one lamp or another, but each of us, in order to be fully who we were created to be, have to shine our light in our own way.

*So, in a world filled with mishaps, disasters, and darkness, do not lose hope, be hope, don't wait...shine like you were born to shine. Amen.