

Oil Shortage

A sermon preached by

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Matthew 25:1-13

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

I’m not a huge Tom Petty fan, but after his recent and unexpected death I began to recall a few of his hits, especial some of his early standards. This week as I was getting ready for this morning, the refrain from his “The Waiting” kept coming to mind while reading the parable of the bridesmaids. Maybe you remember the plaintive quality of Petty’s singing, adding at least a third syllable to “waiting”: “The waiting is the hardest part. Every day you see one more card. You take it on faith, You take it to the heart. The waiting is the hardest part.”

If I were to pick out ten or twenty top hits that would describe me and my life, this might very well be one of them. Because the truth is, I hate to wait. I’m the guy at the grocery store who jumps from one line to the next, always being disappointed when the person in front of me doesn’t have a price on their mango peppermint salsa and we all then wait for a price check. I’m the guy who leaves a voice mail message and expects an immediate response. I’m the guy who can’t understand why the pledges come in so slowly or the reports don’t get done on time or the train is late or the traffic is backed up at the toll booth. For me waiting is the hardest part.

And waiting clearly wasn’t one of the early church’s easiest activities. There is little doubt that as the early church was being formed after Christ’s death and resurrection, most if not all of his followers believe in his imminent return. A lot has been written about what this really

meant to them, but the early Christians thought that whatever form it took, Jesus' second coming or Parousia was something that would take place in the first generation of early Christians. So, when the faithful began to die and years passed without any evidence of Jesus coming again, the church had a waiting problem. How could they interpret and reinterpret Jesus' absence? If his coming wasn't true, then were Jesus' other lessons and teachings also called into question?

So even through the expectation of Jesus' eventual return wasn't discarded by the maturing church, the expectations surrounding its immediacy began to wane. The church began to focus on readiness as an essential factor in Jesus' anticipated return.

In Matthew's gospel, the parable of the ten bridesmaids is sandwiched between two passages that emphasize preparation for the master's return. The prior passage contrasts the "faithful and wise slave" who is at work when his master comes with the self-indulgent slave who mistreats others and is surprised by the master's return. The passage that follows this one is a parable in which the master entrusts his property to his slaves and expects their diligent investment of it. Both parables emphasize the actions of the slaves in the absence of the master. Their faithfulness is known through what they do when he is away. The bridesmaids parable also points to the importance of readiness. Its last verse, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour," points readers toward a message of watchfulness. It suggests that the foolish bridesmaids were not sufficiently prepared.

As the church continued to form and take shape, its creeds and liturgy kept this expectation of watchfulness alive. In a little bit the new members, their sponsors, and all of you will recite the Apostle's Creed, one of the symbols of our faith, where we say that Jesus *will come again to judge the living and the dead*. In our Eucharistic liturgy we say *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again*, and we speak of the expectation of *feasting again with Jesus at the heavenly banquet*.

But despite these frequent and regular references to waiting for Jesus' return, the truth of the matter is that most of us, especially in the mainline Protestant churches, have stopped waiting. We give little thought to Jesus' return, in part because it's been two thousand years and that seems like long enough to wait. And in part because this expectation of waiting has been hijacked by bearded crazy people standing on street corners and telling us the date and time to record in our calendars. But there is a difference between readiness and certainty as to time and

place. If we jettison both then we also move from hope to despair. Like the foolish bridesmaids we experience a shortage not just of oil but of hope as well.

Because if we trust in the coming of Jesus, in whatever ways we wish to envision that, then we will continue to work in the expectation that God will ultimately come to us with justice and mercy. In this way, the 16 of our church members who just returned from Beaumont, Texas and their work on hurricane relief are wise in their expectation that Jesus would come back to make that a reality. If we don't respond to the continuing anger and violence seen most recently in the massacre at First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas. . . . If we don't seek ways to deny guns to the violent and mentally ill. . . . If we don't call to account those who inflame and deny this rage...then we've given up waiting.

There is a United Methodist Church near Sutherland Springs whose members are actually digging graves for the 26 who died in the massacre so the families don't have to pay those burial costs. It is a wonderful and sacrificial act, but if Jesus is coming back I think he expects more than us burying the dead from failed policies and cynical calculations. The vision against which we judge our efforts is our readiness to live according to God's principles. It is a vision of God's ultimate justice and righteousness, without which our world appears very bleak.

Waiting is the hardest part, and yet we are called like bridesmaids to keep the vision of Christ's return, and all that it stands for, alive through our faithful, watchful, and active waiting in the midst of delay. . . .by preparing for the day when we will proclaim that God's promises are true. On that day God will establish justice and righteousness and peace.