

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

GOSPEL

Matthew 25:1-13

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the twenty-fifth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“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.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

As the church’s year comes close to an end, today we hear Jesus tell a parable about what it may be like to wait for what is coming next. In this moment, it feels like an important question. Perhaps it always has. What is next? What does it mean to wait for what is coming? After Sutherland Springs, how will we wait? What will be next? How shall we live in this time where we are between where we are and where we are going?

Many of us may know the words Jesus speaks today well...and others not as much...but regardless, I think the story he tells is more complicated than the first impressions we form from it. This is, of course, true of the best

parables...and also true of so many things in life...and perhaps important for this moment where we find ourselves now.

On the one hand, it fits with a certain brand of religious thought. The type that gives birth to bumper sticker theology like the one that reads: "Jesus is coming! Look busy!" Though this one could say something more like: "Jesus is coming! Look ready!" or "Stay awake!"

The tradition of the parables is carried through each of the gospels in different ways. There are many that are shared by multiple sources. The one we hear today only appears in Matthew.

Even within Matthew's gospel this parable has unique qualities that make it a little more mystifying. The most common signal we know that a parable is coming...perhaps without even realizing it...is the appearance of words like, "The kingdom of heaven is like..."

Perhaps you hear that sentence and are ready to offer a predicate...

The kingdom of heaven is like...a mustard seed, leaven, a treasure in a field, a pearl, a net. Maybe you have your own parable-like images for the kingdom of heaven. We came up with some of our own in seminary. One of my classmates offered that to her, the kingdom of heaven is like the other side of the pillow...cool and refreshing...and always right nearby.

However, there are many parables that don't begin with these simple words. In Matthew, some begin with a phrase translated as "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to..." But today's parable...today's parable doesn't begin that way, either. It is the only parable in Matthew where the kingdom of heaven is described as a thing of the future and not the present. Matthew begins today's parable saying something like, "the kingdom of heaven will be spoken of like..."

It is very nearly the last parable in Matthew (except for the parable of the talents, which comes right afterwards). And it comes as Matthew is discussing the coming of the Son of Man. So, perhaps it makes sense that it is placed in future time. (Sometimes I do wonder if those of us who pore over the words and verb tenses of the Greek text place an unfair burden of specific intention

on those who wrote it. Perhaps Matthew didn't mean that much by placing this parable and only this parable in the future...then again...maybe he did...)

In any case, there are so many more facets of this parable we could unpack...and some are especially striking. First, to me were these words that begin it. Next we hear of bridesmaids...perhaps better translated maidens. They are young women, probably from the family or household of the bridegroom...because they are likely waiting at his home for him to return with his bride from her family's home.

Five of these young women are foolish, and five are wise...though the word in Greek might be better rendered as "shrewd." Their wisdom is a certain kind of cleverness...and perhaps a little more self-serving and conniving than what we might usually mean when we speak of "wisdom."

The shrewd bring extra oil for their lamps, and the others don't. Now...they ALL bring lamps...so it is clear that the hour may become late. HOW late is a matter of guesswork, it seems.

Some of my colleagues online were ready to blame the whole problem that follows on the groom...for being late to begin with...which is an interesting point. If he hadn't been delayed, none of this would have been a problem. But he is.

Commentator Daniel Harrington speculates that the most likely reason for such a delay at the home of the bride is a complication in the negotiations with the bride's father.

Now...here I will join my colleagues, to a point...not in blaming the groom, necessarily...though maybe the bride's father...but more patriarchal culture in general. It seems to me that if this reason for the delay is true, then everything would be resolved if the kingdom of heaven could erase from its being a patriarchal culture that keeps a group of ten young women up late at night while two men argue over the proper price for transferring ownership of a woman from one of them to the other. But maybe that's just me.

In any case, the next interesting detail is that, when the groom does finally arrive...EVERYONE has fallen asleep...not just the foolish women...all of them.

But some are prepared to join the party now that it is continuing, and some aren't. And it seems very much like Jesus is saying that the work of those who are waiting is to be prepared for the unexpected arrival of what is coming next.

But I do wonder. On the one hand, yes...we are all responsible for ourselves. And we must be prepared to live with the consequences of our choices. The shrewd young women weren't wrong to say no when they were asked to share their extra oil. If they had, everyone truly might have ended up in the dark.

But that makes me wonder, too: what if they had? What if they had all ended up in the dark...together...What might have happened then? Would that have been the worst thing?

I don't know if I am convinced from the entirety of Matthew's gospel that fairness is the final yardstick for how we should live in the kingdom of God.

And yet, it is true in the parable...and true in this world...that we expect some people to share beyond what is fair...that we ask those who have prepared for the long haul of doing the work God gives us to help prop up those of us who didn't think it would be so hard. I think of those people who have fortified themselves for the marathon of work ahead of them...who have learned to expect the work to be long and full of waiting... women of color, LGBTQ siblings, and so many others. And, I think of how often they are asked to share their oil with those of us who didn't know what we were getting into. I also think, on this Veteran's Day weekend, of members of the armed forces. President Obama and then Senator Kerry famously parried over the size of our Navy in a debate of campaigns long gone by. And the underlying point was about the logical size of a military in the days of the twenty-first century, when technology allows fewer and fewer to be placed in the truly terrible spaces where the blood and anguish of war is most felt. And of course, it is good that fewer might suffer...and yet...it also means that more and more of us are removed from the knowledge of the depth of that suffering. Our veterans carry a burden we who don't see war like they do can't imagine...and our distance makes it easier to not notice their unmet needs when they come home. We

don't have to spend our own oil to keep the world as it is...so we might not know how to count the cost.

Last of all, is the bridegroom's answer at the door...unrecognizing of the ones who came back late. I wonder...I wonder if this bridegroom can really be the one for whom we wait...if he doesn't know us just because of our failings.

He doesn't sound like the one I've come to know as my Lord. And Jesus has spent many verses before these warning against the false messiahs that will appear.

So, when we look for who we want to be in this parable...I'm not sure I want to be any of them. I don't want to be an unprepared and desperate fool. But I also don't know if I want to be a shrewd and self-serving success at the expense of my friends. I'm not sure I want to be a groom who shows up late and doesn't recognize people who love him and have been waiting for him. And I'm not sure if God wants to be any of those people either.

As with the best parables...each of these characters has something to show us about how we might want to be...and about how the world really is...and what the God's kingdom might be like.

I wish I could offer more answers to the deep questions that yawn in our souls in these days...but our Lord is here speaking in puzzles again...and perhaps sitting to reflect on that without jumping to an easy answer is part of what our spirits need.

He tells us who are sleeping...all...wise and foolish and everything in between to keep watch. Perhaps the best we can do is take it in shifts. Because we need rest, too. Together, maybe we have enough oil...together I think, we can keep watch for what is coming. And even as we wait...there is wedding feast about to begin again...here and now...and we are all here in the light of day to taste and see the goodness of the kingdom of God. And there is a place here...for you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.