

Matthew 25:1-13, Year A  
Nov. 12, 2017  
#Keep awake: Waiting for God

This past week's mass shooting in Texas occurred before our minds had even comprehended the scope of the violence unleashed in Las Vegas. These events bring the realities of life and death sharply into focus. We have no choice but to respond – we cannot pretend it didn't happen!

Our choice lies in how we respond, how we live into this. Do we act and speak pastorally? Do we say with relief, well it wasn't here and it wasn't me – and remain silent?

What would Jesus tweet? *#Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.*

Today's Gospel is an edgy story about the wise and foolish bridesmaids. This is the second of four parables in Jesus' discourse on end times, and takes up the sudden, unexpected quality of the end of time, and the exhortation to be ready. There is no world-destroying apocalyptic. Each parable poses a scenario in which lives are not yet reconciled; sorting out occurs when the Lord comes. "Then", Jesus says, *then* the kingdom will be as he has described it many times. These four parables in Matthew are about what we do while waiting for God.

Three quotations to consider.

*Faithful love, if it is faithful, is judgment.* This is from Stanley Hauerwas' book on Matthew, at 195. *Faithful love, if it is faithful, is judgment.* Judgment, especially judgment on hypocrisy, is not incompatible with the love that Jesus preaches.

*The parable should disturb. If we hear it and are not disturbed, there is something seriously amiss with our moral compass*" Amy Jill Levine, New Testament scholar, writing in *Stories of Jesus*. [repeat]

And, from an unknown pundit, *'It is better to be wise than foolish. But sometimes it is tough to tell the difference.'*

In scripture, the wedding banquet is frequently an image for the end of time. Weddings are fraught with emotions – families and guests are simultaneously at their best and their worst, not unlike our holiday gatherings coming up. Two families, sometimes from opposite ends of the country, political and wealth spectrums, are brought together in the uniting of bride and groom, all drawn into celebration of life. I like that image of the end time. No apocalypse, no outsider/insider, and abundant diversity. But that's the kingdom – what about the wedding, the time spent living into the kingdom?

According to the 1<sup>st</sup> century customs, guests assembled at the home of the bride and were entertained by her parents until the groom was ready. Then all joined in festive procession to the

groom's family home for the wedding celebration, which lasted several days. The night was dark – no electric or gas lamps – and the path between the houses needed illumination for the guests to arrive safely. Holding the light for the procession was an honored role.

In the parable, the guests and bridesmaids fall asleep while waiting for the woefully delayed bridegroom, who doesn't arrive until midnight. Five maidens brought extra oil for their lamps – anticipating delay? – and refuse to share with the five whose lamps run out. The five needing oil are resourceful enough to get more in the middle of the night. But, while they are out searching for oil, the procession begins, the door is closed and they are denied entry to the banquet.

Jesus invites recognition that there *will be* an end of time – just as life on earth ends. There *will be* an accounting, a sorting out. *Faithful love, if it is faithful, is judgment.*

But the story doesn't sound much like Jesus' teachings about charity and love for others. We tend to emphasize sorting out the wise and the foolish, seeing the parable as 'autobiographical'. If the bridegroom is Jesus, we who are prepared with oil – our faith and maybe our good deeds -- will enter the banquet hall and others will not.

Our palpable discomfort arises from self-awareness – we are all wise, we are all foolish at times. How will *we* be judged, and, are we prepared? We are human, we are not always prepared. *It is better to be wise than foolish. But sometimes it is tough to tell the difference.*

A recent cartoon, *Non-sequitur*, featured the little girl talking with her imaginary friend. Here is the dialogue: *there is going to be a pop quiz. We need to study. Will it be math, science, history? Dunno. Well, when will it be? Dunno. What shall we do. Maybe try staying awake in class?]*

What if the parable isn't about the oil, something we have or have not at the appointed hour, but about waiting for the bridegroom and joining the procession together?

What if this is about our moral compass, where and when we draw lines of exclusion or acceptance? Consider the bridesmaids who refuse to share, knowing full well the likely consequence for their less well-prepared companions. The so-called wise women are selfish, their vision is limited, and they assume there is only so much oil to go around. Scarcity not abundance.

When is selfishness appropriate, and when is it not? Are we inclined to exclude those who are less well-prepared, or to insist our interpretation of faith is the only truth? Do we focus more on solidifying our position, or on helping to strengthen others?

How do we wait and endure? The bridesmaids had an important role to play. Although the midnight run to the 7-eleven was successful, the five miss the coming of the groom and the celebration. Do we, like the foolish bridesmaids, run off, just as we are called upon to do our

part? Keep silent when we should speak out?

I am gratified by the many women speaking out at *#metoo*. Most women I know have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. Many kept silent to keep their positions, and were left behind, missing the step up the corporate ladder. The wedding procession went on without the five bridesmaids, and by the time they caught up, the doors were shut.

Slamming the door in the face of friends? Personally, I admit I would rather not be a bridesmaid charged with carrying the light – just put me down as one of the sleepy invited guests.

We can't ignore the quirky fact in the parable that the groom was late. Why? Traffic on the freeway, trouble negotiating the dowry or wedding contract. He doesn't show up until midnight. If the groom is Jesus, maybe he was delayed feeding the poor or healing the sick along the way. The lamps readied for the procession burn down. Should we rejoice at the suitor's coming, or condemn him for being late?

If he had been on time, the problem would not have arisen, right? I wonder. Do our expectations not met transform our waiting? How do we wait for God when life isn't the way we had planned it, or even how we expected it to be?

Well, it is an edgy parable.

Faithful love, if it is faithful, is judgment. Together, the ten bridesmaids diminish the celebration. They could have all gone through the door together. Judgment on hypocrisy, the concern about the oil, the less than faithful waiting. Our inability to endure delay. In truth, the falling asleep doesn't seem to count against the guests or the bridesmaids. It is just a facet of their humanity.

Better to be ready than not? Sure, who would argue. You do not know the hour. On hold while waiting for a live customer service representative. Or waiting for your computer to boot up. Or the 'waiting for God' kind of waiting – Waiting for a loved one to come out of surgery, or a baby to be born. How do you prepare for the reality of death and hold to the hope of life?

The difficulty of waiting lies in our lack of control, fear of the unknown, the worry of whether we are ready, anxiety about being prepared – waiting can leave us discontented with the present and too focused on the future. The realities of life and death.

In the next chapter of Matthew, Matt. 26, Jesus shares the last supper with his friends and heads to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He asks Peter and James and John to come with him, to stay awake with him as he prays. The disciples, who not too long before have heard this parable of the ten bridesmaids and the injunction to stay awake, go to sleep anyway. Three times, Jesus awakens the disciples, and the third time it is to tell them that the betrayer is at hand.

About that closed door. In Matthew 27, we are told about a stone rolled by Joseph of Arimathea across the tomb of Jesus. A closed door, a barrier between life and death. The stone is rolled back, the door is opened in the resurrection.

I wonder. What do we do in our lives to close doors to others? Is silence or inaction about sexual harassment, racist intimidation, gun control legislation, medical care for the poor, closing doors for others?

Do we act out of fear of scarcity, or belief in abundance? Do we suffer from an illusion of endless opportunity to do what counts? Will we be present when called upon to respond to God's call? Have we missed the groom's coming?

How we choose to live in waiting matters. Falling asleep does not count against the bridesmaids, but not being there when the groom comes, does. How we choose to live in the present matters. Being faithful to God's coming into our lives, matters.

And, there will be a pop quiz.

Any moment is a potential moment, a potential place, for an encounter with God. It can be a moment of beauty, friendship, passion – or a moment of terror, pain and loss. Defining moments in which we invest ourselves and our energies. Is our faith betrayed or lived out in those moments?

In times that are unsure, in times when *we* are unsure, it is all the more important to do what we have been taught to do. Stay awake.

In the waiting and the wondering, we know that God is here, and we can trust that truth.

Amen

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