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**St. James Episcopal**

**November 8, 2020**

**Twenty-third Sunday After Pentecost**

**Year A**

**Matthew 25:1-13**

***Do you have enough oil?***

Today’s Gospel parable is a difficult and disturbing one. It is one where you have to really take into account the context of when and where it was taking place and what was Jesus trying to convey when he was sharing this parable. The Gospel of Matthew as a whole was written in part to convince the Jewish people that Jesus was the Messiah - the long-awaited king.

Matthew 25 may be divided into 3 sections: the parable of the ten virgins (vv 1-13), the parable of the talents (vv 14-30), and the sheep and the goats (vv 31-46).

The purpose of the parable in this chapter is for Jesus to give time between his death, resurrection, and his second coming. And there is talk of judgement. And, it also seems that this chapter of Matthew speaks to the responsibilities of being a Christian- what it means to live the Christian life.

The parable today is often referred to as the parable of the 10 virgins or bridesmaids. Or the parable of the foolish women. Or the parable of the 5 wise women. It is a story of 10 virgins/bridesmaids taking lamps to wait to usher in the bridegroom at a wedding feast. The bridegroom was delayed and those who had brought extra oil in their flasks to refill their lamps had enough oil, and those who didn’t bring any extra oil - well, their lamps ran out. When the bridegroom arrived, those who weren’t ready with oil in their lamps were “shut out”.

The Gospel parable today is one that has been described by at least one author as being, “Odd, ominous and rather archaic” [[1]](#footnote-2)

Odd - because out of the 104 parables mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew alone, there are 85 characters mentioned -73 of them are men, only 12 are women. Even among the 12, 10 are the bridesmaids, which makes for only about three instances where women are mentioned in all the other 104 parables.[[2]](#footnote-3) So this parable even mentioning women is strange.

Ominous - because it seems like the bridesmaids did the best they could and yet, the door was shut to them.

Archaic - the underrepresentation of women in Scriptures causes us to listen more closely to the voices of the women in this text - to listen to their presence. And to think about the impact of representation or the lack thereof.

Matthew’s parable are, by and large, exhortations to a community that has come through some significant duress to keep the faith, to confess Christ, and to wait expectantly for his return, even though it has already been delayed beyond what first generation believers anticipated.

The Thessalonians to whom Paul was writing around 51 AD or so are anxious that they have missed out on Jesus’ return The people were anxious. They had been waiting long enough.

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting is something none of us likes to do. We increasingly have become a nation of people of impatience. One of my dearest friends in the world is honestly one of the worlds worst. She seemingly cannot wait for anything. Driving, doctor’s office visits, lines. She immediately starts complaining; many of us do. But honestly, that type of waiting is seemingly insignificant. We are just passing time.

Another kind of waiting, waiting for something that our hearts’ desire is a very difficult kind of waiting. We tend to try to make things happen. Some wait to get pregnant (and grieve the loss if they can’t), waiting for test results, waiting for a job offer… waiting is difficult. Waiting for those things we desire most is hard.

We tend to think of waiting simplistically. We wait until we get what we want. Biblically though, waiting - the process of waiting - is what forms us. It is what has the potential to make us into the people that God desires us to be. We as a people tend to focus on outcome. We are outcome focused. We want to know the end game, we want to know how to get there and we are trained to get it done. And there is some validity to that train of thought. But in the Christian life - specifically, while the end game is important (it is eternity after all) much of biblical teaching is about the process. It is in who we are, it is in our becoming, it is in the process of waiting where we become the people God would have us to be. It is in how we live our life.

John Ortberg, author and evangelical pastor described waiting this way, “Biblically waiting is not just something we have to do until we get what we want. Waiting is part of the process of becoming what God wants us to be”.

The Thessalonians who are addressed today in our Epistolary reading, are anxious because they think they have missed the 2nd coming. The passage begins, “We want you to be quite certain …” and the passage ends with “…with such thoughts as these then, you should encourage one another.”

You should encourage one another. The early church was waiting on Christ’s return and were anxious to know when it would happen. Project that out another 2000 years from the Thessalonians and Jesus’ disciples, and who is still waiting eagerly, anxiously for Jesus’ return? Realistically, not many of us. We speak of it, we sing of it, but I can honestly say I do not think for myself that I have ever woken up and and said, “Oh today may be the day that Christ will return. I better be ready.”

And so, in some way, this parable seems a bit unfair to me. All the bridesmaids had brought oil (they had their lamps) - the foolish ones just didn’t bring extra flasks of oil. Now, I am a preparer and a planner and I may have been one of the ones to have an extra flask of oil- but the others didn’t know how late the bridegroom would be. It seems unfair that they were shut out.

They were encouraged that they should “keep awake (you should have remained awake) for you know neither the day nor the hour.” And I think they tried. But the bridegroom was delayed. They grew tired.

An interesting phrase in this parable is that after they had fallen asleep and were awoken and told the bridegroom was coming, “they trimmed their lamps”.

To trim your lamps for those of you who know how to operate an oil lamp, is to turn the wick back, shorten the part of the wick that is burning which can cause the wick to last longer- which will cause your lamp to burn longer.

Which I think is something for us to think about.

The kind of waiting Matthew is encouraging through this parable is hard. Waiting for something which in your mind is way over due.

Waiting that involves active preparation when you’re not even sure what you should be preparing for. That kind of waiting is challenging.

I think one thing that Jesus was trying to communicate here to the disciples, is, “Live your life with this awareness-that I can return at any moment.” Be ready. And, “trim your lamps.” Live your life as if you are preparing for the slow and steady long haul of faith.

We can grow weary in our work, frustrated by the lack of outcomes we see, or distracted by the thousand and one other obligations that fill each of our lives. In short, let’s admit that on any given day, each of us may discover we are a foolish bridesmaid. We came, we were excited, but we fell asleep. We weren’t prepared for the long night, for the long haul. We become tired and discouraged.

I think of this not just on an individual level, but also communally. How can I individually “trim my lamp” and be prepared for the long haul, and how can we communally? What kind of churches are sustained, built to last?

Some distinctions about the Episcopal church, the Episcopal faith, are that we follow a liturgy - a worship that is orderly and thought through - prepared for us. We are not swayed nor or our heads turned by the “latest and greatest” way to do church. We follow our liturgical calendar. We number our days and our years. We let the calendar speak to and through us. We have daily offices we can follow that can help pace our days and years.

We are not always the flashiest - we rarely are. We are not known for innovation and “new ways of doing things”. And I personally rejoice in this.

We are designed for the long haul. We teach our children catechism. We recite the creeds. We can give ourselves permission to “trim our lamps”. We don’t have to be anxiously concerned - we can steady ourselves and our days.

In Matthew for the next three weeks in the Gospel passages, Jesus speaks to various facets of waiting and preparing for the kingdom of heaven. In this parable, he speaks in future tense and says, “the kingdom of heaven will be like this”.

There will be those who have prepared, who are ready, who have been faithful, who have “trimmed their lamps”. And there will be those whose lamps burned out.

Paul closes this part of his letter to those first-century Thessalonians that found their own waiting nearly intolerable with these words, “Therefore, encourage one another….”

That is our role as the church. In the waiting…

Encourage one another.

We are those who wait for each other – wise and foolish alike. We are those who sit vigil for each other at times of pain, loss or bereavement. We are those who celebrate achievements and console after disappointment.

We are those who give hope when hope is scarce, comfort when it is needed, and courage when we are afraid. We are, in short, those who help each other to wait, prepare, and keep the faith.

Lord Jesus, help us in our waiting.

Amen.

1. http://www.davidlose.net/2014/11/pentecost-22-a/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Nicola Slee, “Parables and Women’s Experience” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)