

Matthew 25:1-13**The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids**

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this.

Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him."

Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out."

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."

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.

Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Settling In for a Long Wait

Waiting. It's awful. You may not know this about me, but I tend to not be particularly patient. I don't like to wait. I especially don't like it when I really have to wait: when I'm sick and waiting for the doctor to see me, when there's only one lane open at the grocery store checkout line and there are 3 people in front of me and all I have is a gallon of milk, and I know there's no milk at home. I don't even like to wait for coffee to brew ...so I guess it's a good thing I gave coffee up for Lent. There are special kinds of impatience at my house: "Journey-proud" is what Ben calls the condition that strikes the night before one of us has to go out of town, and we're anxious to get started, and neither of us can sleep. That was Thursday night, before he left to go to Lake Junaluska with his youth group. "Slow as Christmas" is the term Ben uses to describe waiting for a special day...this time of year, we can really relate to how slow Christmas is in coming. Ben's full of these great terms...guess it's Alabama coming out, and I know he's pretty impatient himself.

People were impatient in Jesus' day, too. They were impatient with centuries of rule by one foreign king after another. They were impatient with Roman taxes and Roman occupation. They were impatient with the way things were, and they were probably more than a little impatient with waiting for the Messiah to come and turn things around. They were impatient with a status quo that suggested there were other gods than their God, other "favored people," and that they somehow were less than the others.

Into their impatience, into their anxiety, their sense that the Messiah was coming as "slow as Christmas" and their restless anticipation of a time when God would put all things

right, Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids must have fallen like a lead balloon. All they wanted was change, the restoration of the nation of Israel, God's chosen people. They probably had a little less patience with listening to parables about weddings and bridesmaids than they might have hearing about the coming day of the Lord, when all wrongs would be righted, but they didn't understand what they were hearing.

And things are not that different for us today. We live in a world where it seems that bad news comes faster than we can take it in. Last week, it was an earthquake. This week, there's another devastating college campus shooting and bombs in Mexico City and Pakistan. We too are waiting...waiting for God to set things right, to bring peace to our troubled world, to vindicate our faith. We're waiting for the Messiah to come again, to mark us as his favored people, to bring change. We've been waiting nearly 2000 years, and Jesus meets our impatience as he did theirs: with a parable about a wedding.

Weddings were occasions for great huge parties, for days of feasting and preparation. There was plenty of time to get "journey proud" as the bride and her friends, dressed in their finery, waited for the groom's negotiations with her family to come to an end, so that he and his friends would come and escort the whole party to the celebratory feast. And the feast could last for days—you can imagine how impatient the bride and her bridesmaids might have gotten as the day wore on, as afternoon turned into evening, as the sun went down and they had to light oil lamps in order to see.

In this parable, Jesus tells us of two groups: the wise bridesmaids and the foolish ones. Comparing wisdom to foolishness would have been familiar to any who grew up listening to the rabbis and to their families telling stories. We can find it in the wisdom literature of the

Proverbs, and even in other stories Jesus told: for example, the wise man who built his house on a foundation of stone, and the foolish man who built his house on a bed of shifting sand. The rains came down, and the floods came up (this would be according to the Sunday School song, more so than the Gospel) and the house on the rock stood firm, but the house on the sand collapsed. Of course, in Beaufort we know that it's practical (and necessary) to build on sand as long as you have the site properly prepared and a solid foundation...but that's beside the point!

All the bridesmaids were ready with lamps, in case the bridegroom was delayed into the night. And in this parable, delayed he was...so late that despite their excitement and impatience, and maybe because they'd been too journey-proud to sleep the night before, and that bridegroom had come as slow as Christmas, the bride and her bridesmaids all fell asleep, with their lamps burning.

Finally, at midnight, when decent folks were shut safely into their houses with the doors locked, the bridegroom came to call the girls to the party. Finally! The bridesmaids woke up, all ten of them, and trimmed their lamps, and the five wise ones refilled their lamps with oil to light the way. The foolish girls who had not thought to bring an extra flask of oil begged some from their friends, but there was not enough to go around. Frantically, they ran out to buy more, but in leaving the house, they were separated from the wedding party. It being well after midnight when they finally arrived at the bridegroom's house for the banquet, the door was locked against the night and they were not allowed in. Jesus ends the story by saying, "Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

"Keep awake" actually might be better translated using the words immortalized by the Boy Scouts: "Be prepared". After all, all the bridesmaids fell asleep...that's not what set them

apart. Instead, it was being prepared, having the forethought to bring extra oil, just in case. In these war-like times, we might talk about maintaining a state of readiness: readiness not just for Christ to come again, but readiness as we settle in for a long wait. It's already been nearly 2000 years, and there's no real reason to think that it might not be 2000 more, or ten thousand...but still, we are called to pattern ourselves on those wise bridesmaids and be prepared.

Nearly nine years ago, I preached on this passage in November 1999. Remember what being prepared meant then? We've nearly forgotten the drama of "Y2K" and the fear that our computers would fail, and with them shipping (no food), communications (no phones) and the power grid (no heat!). Ben and I got married on December 29, 1999, and sent out pictures to our friends with the caption: "what we did for Y2K." What we did was get married, and then contrive to celebrate for days. We went to a resort that Ben's brother was a member of, and ate and laughed and danced on New Year's Eve...and everyone paused at midnight, saw that there was a noticeable lack of drama, and went back to dancing and eating and laughing.

"Be prepared" means more to us Christians than having a set of backup batteries for the flashlight, more than having some bottled water in case of a storm. For Christians, being prepared means being ready to settle in for the long wait until Christ comes again...being ready to date and to marry, to go to college and find work and raise families and plan for retirement...to live our lives in this long, long period of waiting, and to live as though we know that Christ's coming makes a difference.

Being prepared means living through whatever life throws at us, and keeping our faith, in the knowledge that life isn't fair, that terrible things happen, just as the good ones do, that

we will have a lot to live through, and many trials to test us. The irony that I am preaching after the terrible shootings at Northern Illinois University is not lost on me; it's not even been a year since I preached the Sunday after the Virginia Tech shootings. How can we be prepared for such an unexpected and random attack? How can we be prepared for terror attacks, like the bombing in Mexico City this week? Does being prepared make us jaded, calloused, hardened to the horrors that may come? Does it turn us instead into survivalists, with cellars packed full of supplies to carry us through "the worst", whatever that worst may be?

Or do we instead prepare ourselves to be the witness of Christ in such troubled times, just as we are in the better ones? Rather than hoard in fear, are we perhaps called to prepare to give with a sense of Jesus' generosity to others in need, to offer ourselves as living Christs, even as we know that Jesus offered himself for us? How do we settle in for the long wait, how do we remain prepared, how do we live in both the urgency of Jesus and the knowledge that he may be slow in returning?

The Gospels give us some confusing messages about when his return might be. No one knows the hour or the day of his coming, but also that some of the disciples will not die before he comes again. It gets a little puzzling...we know the disciples all lived to see the Resurrection but there's still this coming again that Paul writes about, that John wants us to look forward to, that Jesus said was coming. So we learn to wait, just as the early Christians did, and we learn how to live in the holy mystery our communion liturgy speaks of: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

The next part of that prayer gives us some clue as to how we are to live: "Pour out your Holy Spirit on us...that we may be for the world the Body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. By

your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.”

That in fact is the answer to our quandary today: how do we live in the long wait? How are we to be prepared? What does it look like to be the wise bridesmaid in 2008, in a world with earthquakes and bombings and tornadoes and identity theft and blizzards and random shootings? We are the Body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. If we have any answer, if who we are and what we do makes any sense at all, this is it: We are the Body of Christ.

We are the people of faith and hope, even when it seems like hope is lost, when all is dark, when our losses weigh down our hearts. We keep the faith, share it, spread it, because we believe that God does love us, that God does make a difference in the world, that the promises of the Bible are true and that God is with us, always.

We are a people of generosity and compassion. Like Jesus, we look on people who are different from us and choose not to condemn, but to invite. We look at hurting people and bring healing. We see those who have suffered, and we bring them peace and help. We rebuild houses after storms have torn them down, and we rebuild lives when the storms of life rage.

We are a people who feed the hungry, every chance we get. We raise funds for soup kitchens and provide benevolence funds for emergencies in the community. We pool our resources to reach out the world over and provide food, shelter, and medical care in Jesus' name. And we offer LOGOS, and Sunday School, Bible studies and men's and women's groups to feed hungry hearts that want to be a part of the Body of Christ.

We are a people who love because Jesus loved. In the words of a great old Southern saying, “we never see a stranger.” Instead we welcome people—even those who don't look like us, live like us, or speak our language—because we know that the Body of Christ is made up of

all kinds of people. Because we know we can only love because he first loved us. And because we know that he still loves us, despite our flaws and failures.

And friends, we are a people who are flawed, who do fail. Sometimes we don't get along with one another. Sometimes we disagree about how best to be the Body of Christ in the world. That's who we are as human beings. But in our hearts, we are also God's children, and we know about grace, and repentance, about forgiveness and second chances and so we try again to get it right.

We are a people who live to be a light in darkness, to keep the light of Christ when the news from around the world and the trauma in our own lives wants to drown it out. We are a people of endless faith and hope because we love and serve a God who literally loved us to death—not our death, but his. We are the people of God, the Body of Christ, because we share that great love that esteems others even over ourselves. And if we can't do that perfectly, then we can try again. And again.

We are now at the third Sunday in Lent, a season of disciplining ourselves to be like Jesus, of examining ourselves and finding out where we fail, where we're not perfect, where we just sometimes mess up. But it's not a season of endless condemnation, of weeks of punishing ourselves for real or imagined sins. Instead, every year as we approach the miracle of Easter, we come to it humbled, so that we can get a better picture of the greatness of God's love, of who we are as the Body of Christ, of what sustains us during the long wait, and what we have to offer to others: the grace of the Resurrection, new life, and membership in the Body with us.

The Body of Christ is not made up of Lenten people. We are not a people of constant judgment and condemnation. We are not a people who catalogue those real and imagined sins.

We are an Easter people, who know that every Sunday is a little Easter, a joyous celebration of the Resurrection, and celebrate we must. For we are not only a people of faith and hope, of generosity and compassion, who feed the hungry, who love with the love of Christ, a people who are flawed but still a light in the darkness, we are a Resurrection people. A people in waiting, yes, but a people prepared for the wait, however long it may be.

We are the Body of Christ. Amen.