

Sermon Preached November 9, 2008  
26<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
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Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus' parables are often based on customs familiar to his audience. The parable of the bridesmaids is no exception. You can still see the custom observed today in the Middle East, which I discovered reading an article in the newspaper written by a man staying in a luxury hotel in Cairo. He was startled to see some bridesmaids with candles walking through the hotel lobby, looking for the bridegroom to escort him to the wedding.

It seemed anachronistic in a contemporary luxury hotel, because it is an ancient custom going back before Jesus' time. In those days the guests did not know the actual time of the wedding. It was to be a surprise, anticipated with great expectation, with everyone watching and waiting, because it could happen any time. A game was made of it. The bridesmaids got ready first, then sat with the bride to wait for the bridegroom to come. The groomsmen try to surprise the bridesmaids; they sneak up, and shout: "The bridegroom cometh." At which time the bridesmaids escort the bridegroom into the celebration. The door is shut, the party begins, and those who are not there are left out.

Jesus' parable is based on that custom. The bridesmaids wait to greet the bridegroom, but, as you now expect, the bridegroom is late, so they must wait far into the night. Five of the bridesmaids are prepared for the delay, and they have plenty of oil for their lamps. Five are unprepared. They must find more oil for their lamps. While they are away the bridegroom comes, so those who are prepared accompany him to the banquet, and those who were not prepared for a long wait are left out.

That is our text for this morning, and like all parables it can be interpreted several ways. First, we can assume that when Jesus first told it the purpose was to get the audience to make a decision, is he the Messiah or not? Those who recognize who he is, the Messiah, the one they have been waiting for, and take advantage of the moment, enter the Kingdom. In this parable, as in other Jewish literature, the Kingdom is pictured as a great feast called, "The Messianic Banquet." As for the others, those who are asleep, or too busy with other matters, or who don't expect a Messiah, or who don't have the discipline to wait, they miss out. So when Jesus first told the parable, it undoubtedly meant act now. Act while the bridegroom is with us.

But in the next generation, the generation after the Resurrection, and after the Church was founded, in other words, Matthew's generation, there is a new situation. The Church's situation was not one of having to make up their minds that Jesus was Messiah. They had done that, they were believers. Their problem was Jesus is not here. The Kingdom is not yet here. The life Jesus described in his teaching is not here. They had received the invitation to join the Kingdom and had said, "Yes." Many of them had made significant sacrifices to be there. Now they are there – in Church – the community of those who believe Jesus is Messiah. So where is he? Where's the

bridegroom? They have been waiting now for Jesus to return – as promised. “Christ has died. Christi is risen. Christ will come again.” So where is he?

The lesson the early Church heard in the parable is not the urgency to choose, but the patience to wait. As the last line of the parable reads, “Watch, for nobody knows the hour or the day.” Now you heard the New Revised Standard Translation read this morning. That version reads, “Keep awake...” But the NRSV translators messed up. “Keeping awake” is a passive activity. “Watching” or “waiting” conveys an expectation, anticipation, a hope. So I prefer “Watch for nobody knows the hour or day,” or as other older translations have it, “Wait for no one knows...”

W.H. Auden wrote a play entitled “For The Time Being,” which was his way of describing our condition today. We live in “the time being,” the time between the times. The time between his first coming in humility as a babe in a manger, and his second coming in glory as Lord. The question for the Christian, and the question Auden examines, is how do you wait for the Lord? What does it look like? That is the question Matthew addresses. That is why he includes this parable in his gospel.

But I want you to notice something. Matthew put three parables here, back to back. The 25<sup>th</sup> chapter opens with the parable of the bridesmaids. Then immediately comes the parable of the talents. And finally the parable of the last judgment, sometimes called the parable of the sheep and the goats. The three are supposed to be read together. So the lectionary messed up again, splitting up the three parables to be read over three Sundays. Which means that someone else will preach on the parable of the talents next week, and the judgment parable the following Sunday. I am about to trespass on their parables, so my apologies, but Matthew’s point is lost if you don’t look at all three.

Here is the meaning of the sequence. To the question, “When will the Kingdom come?” The answer is in the bridesmaids’ parable. No one knows, so wait, be patient. Now if it ended there, if that is all Jesus had to say on the matter, we would all be “quietists,” cloistered monks and nuns.

But here comes the next question. “What are we to do while we wait?” The answer is in the parable of the talents. Work as if the Kingdom is already here. Invest your treasure, and yourself, in this world to make it look more like the Kingdom you are waiting and praying for.

And the final parable, the judgment parable, is there because even though we don’t know the hour or the day, we are still curious. What will it be like when the Messiah returns in glory? The answer will surprise you. Jesus will say, “I was here all along, and you did not see me. I was with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner.” In other words, the ones he was found among when he was here in the flesh are the ones he will be with in the Spirit. “So if you have served the least of these you have served me.”

The three parables are there to teach Christians how to be Christian in “the mean time,” in between the times, the time of his first coming in humility, and his second coming in glory. We are to be patient – and work. Not lose heart, or get discouraged, or become cynical. That is why “waiting on the Lord” is a spiritual discipline practiced by the saints for 2000 years.

There is a saying, “you get what you deserve in this life.” I don’t believe that. Few of us get what we deserve in this life. My observation is most of us get much better than we deserve. A man went to get his picture taken. He said to the photographer, “I hope you will do me justice.” The photographer replied, “Sir, you don’t need justice, you need mercy.” If we got what we deserved in this life, most of us wouldn’t want it. So I don’t think you can say we get what we deserve.

But I do believe we get what we expect. That is not an absolute either, but it is backed by some interesting data. Doctors have known about placebos for a long time. Taking something that doesn’t cure the problem medically, but you think it does, as a result you feel better. That’s called a “placebo.” Psychologists have invented a new word, “nocebo.” It is the opposite of placebo. Their evidence shows that what you believe can make you sick, as well as healthy. People overwhelmed by hopelessness and despair, who don’t expect anything good to come of their lives, are more susceptible to sickness, and even death. I have observed that in my own unscientific observation. I have seen people stay alive against all odds, outlive medical prognoses, because they wanted to see a grandchild born, or witness a wedding long anticipated. And they made it. I have seen others, when a serious illness struck, say, “This is the end.” And they go quickly. So it’s sometimes true, you get what you expect.

Or we could put it this way. What you wait for in the future affects the quality of life in the present. Remember the words of Isaiah:

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
They shall run and not be weary,  
They shall walk and not faint.

I’ve known those people too. They demonstrate amazing strength. You say about them, “How do they do it? Where do they get the strength? How can they be so hopeful?” Every church has them. They practice the spiritual discipline of “waiting.”

I thought of them this week. No matter how you voted last Tuesday, you had to feel the historic significance of an African-American elected president of the United States. I will admit it was an emotional moment for me, because as an American who knows that the “original sin” of America was slavery, and that it has poisoned our life as a people, white and black, for nearly four hundred years. And during that time black people have waited, and waited, empowered by a dream. It was such a simple dream – that they be included in America. No one articulated that more clearly than Martin Luther King, Jr. in his speech at the Lincoln Memorial, “I Have A Dream,” in which he envisioned a future in eloquent images of the way life should be. And that vision of the future gave strength to those struggling to make it real in the present.

What you wait for in the future shapes the quality of your life in the present.

Some of you here this morning were disappointed with the passage of Proposition 8. The message of these parables is the same for you. “Wait” is the message of the bridesmaids, and

“keep on working” is the message of the talents. That is a spiritual discipline. Keep on when you want to quit, expect hardship to be a part of the waiting, and endure it, letting the vision of the future shape the quality of your life in the present.

There is a wonderful story about Ruth Gordon, the actress. She wanted all her life to be an actress, but from the beginning she was discouraged. Her mother told her she would never make it. Her teachers told her she was too short, and not pretty enough. Her drama coach told her she should try something else, she had no talent. But she kept on going and became an international star, winner of Oscars, Golden Globes, and Emmys. She was asked, “How did you do this against such terrible odds?” She said, “Never face the fact unless you know how to forget them.”

What you hope for in the future will shape what you pay attention to in the present.

In thinking about this discipline, I remembered an organization back in the 1980’s called “Beyond War.” It was started primarily by scientists and physicians who took Albert Einstein’s words seriously, “Everything has changed, save our modes of thinking, and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.”

That was during the Cold War. Russia and the United States had missiles pointed at each other. If only a portion of those arsenals had been deployed it would have caused what in those days was called “nuclear winter.” So these people in Beyond War said Einstein is right. Everything in the world has changed except our way of thinking. We still think war is inevitable. Human beings have always thought that. In fact they made going to war a matter of honor. Like old Teddy Roosevelt who believed that a nation ought to go to war periodically to keep morally fit. War, for Teddy, was a form of “working out.”

Einstein said the world has changed. We can’t think that way anymore. So these Beyond War people, some of who were in my church, set out to change the way people think, believing that if they can get enough people to believe that war is not inevitable, the Cold War would end. Guess what? In 1989 the Cold War ended. A lot of people assigned themselves credit for that, especially politicians. Beyond War said, “We did it.” I’m not sure they can prove it, but it is still true; what you expect in the future will shape your life in the present.

Einstein’s words have a biblical ring to them. “Everything has changed.” As Paul put it, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come.” If you are in Christ the world ought to look different to you. You should have double vision. You not only see the way it is, you see the way it will be when the Kingdom comes in its fullness, and you get to work to make the way the world is now look the way it will be them.

A few years ago there was a delightful biography of Fats Waller entitled “Ain’t Misbehavin’.” Fats Waller, like most African American jazz musicians, got his start in the church. He was the son of a minister in Harlem and as a young boy played the piano in that church. The first song Fats Waller wrote was for that church and it had this marvelous title. “Everything Not Of Jesus Shall Come Down.”

Which is what the New Testament says about the future. In the end will be Jesus. How it will happen, when it will happen, we don't know. No one knows. We only know the future will be the way Jesus is.

So we wait – and watch – and work.