

Matthew 25:1-13
November 8, 2020
“Being Ready for the Kingdom of God”

About the only thing said by the *first* commentator I read on this morning’s Scripture Reading was that he found it to be a passage that it was “*difficult* for him to **warm up** to”. And I understood right away what he meant, on account of the way this passage of Scripture has *usually* been read and interpreted, namely as a rather **brutally exclusive** description of what the kingdom of God (or, in Matthew’s Gospel, the equivalent expression, “kingdom of heaven”) is like.

Brutal exclusion *is* hard to “warm up to”.

Not only, i.e., are *half* of the Ten Bridesmaids ultimately *shut out* of the Wedding Feast, but Jesus tells this story in such a way as to make it **their own fault**, which is very much *at odds* with the way we *normally* think about how it is we come to be *included* in the great **celebration** which *is* the kingdom’s presence, *namely* that we are *included* by **grace**, as a *gift*, and **not** on the basis of anything *we* have done (or *excluded* on the basis of what we have failed to do!). Which, in terms of this parable, means that when we arrive -- *even late* -- to the celebration we won’t be greeted by being told by the Bridegroom -- through the door -- that he does not even *know* us!

So, what gives here? I think problems such as this are the product of our trying to take this story of Jesus to be parable, **not** about the kingdom of God – viz., the restored rule of God over an unruly world -- but about “salvation” -- about who gets “saved” and who doesn’t, who is in and who is out. What’s important is to understand that this story is part of a conversation which back in Mt. 24:3, when the disciples gather with Jesus on the Mount of Olives (just outside of Jerusalem), and ask him, “What will be the **sign** of...the *end of the age*?”

It’s important to understand, however, that by “end of the *age*” Jesus’ disciples are not asking about the “end of the world”: *1st-c. Judaism had no such concept*. What they are asking about is by what **sign** they will be able to know that the “age” -- the **era** -- of Israel’s *subjugation* to various pagan powers – which has continued at this point in time for most of the last 600 years – will be over, and a **new** “age” of Israel’s glory and worldly prominence will begin. **What they are really asking about, i.e., is when will the world will be put right again**, and not *only* for the sake of Israel, but *also* for the sake of all the other nations of the earth, insofar as Israel -- as the Covenant Missionary People of God – fulfills their ancient calling, to bring blessing to “*all the families of the earth*” (Gen. 12:3), and serve God in the world in such an *exemplary* way as to be a “*light to the nations*” (Isa. 42:6).

And what Jesus *answers* in this story is, "**Not soon.**" What he actually says here is that, "**Then** the kingdom of heaven will be like this..." By beginning this parable of the kingdom with "Then", Jesus points to a time when the Church will experience the **delay** of the kingdom coming, and so be forced into a posture of **waiting**, of *faithful* waiting and *vigilant watching*. Such that, *whenever* and *wherever* the kingdom appears -- becomes suddenly *visible, discernible* -- we are ready to seize the opportunity to respond to it. The only difference here, between the "wise" and "foolish" bridesmaids was that the "wise" ones brought with them enough oil to cover the contingency of the bridegroom arriving for the Wedding Celebration at a -- **completely** -- **unexpected**, *viz.*, at a **crazily late** hour of the night. They, *i.e.*, **waited** in the *right* way and, sure enough, were there to be awakened by the Bridegroom's arrival, and accompany him into the Wedding Feast, while the other half of the group were off trying to find a **24-hour convenience** store that sells lamp oil!

This word about **delay** -- this was an important word for Jesus' first disciples, and also for the early Christian congregations to whom Matthew directed his Gospel. Why? Because by -- what was likely -- the last quarter of the 1st-c. AD, Christians were -- were for a number of reasons -- urgently expecting, and hoping for the **imminent return** of the *crucified, risen* and *ascended* Jesus, and the **culmination** of all he had accomplished in his *first* coming. They are waiting on this, but it's not happening. He's not coming. Maybe he's *never* coming back?

"**No**," Matthew says -- by including this story of Jesus in his Gospel -- Jesus *is* coming back. There's no question of that. There **will** be a culmination of his world-redeeming work. There's no question about that. The *only* question -- and the only thing you, as his disciple, need to be concerned about is, "**Will you be ready?**"

Well, here we are, roughly 20 centuries later in time, and in the life of the Church, and I want to suggest that the only helpful way for *us* to understand and respond to this passage of Scripture is allow it to ask of us the question, "**How is your waiting going?**" Not so much in terms of, if Jesus comes back today, are you ready for the kingdom of God *in all its fullness* to envelop you, sweep you up into its entirely transformed reality, but *more* in terms of, when the kingdom of God -- operative now, in this age, through the **Spirit** of the Risen Jesus -- "**comes near**", are you *ready* to respond?

This *is*, remember, what Jesus said was happening, *with* his coming, *through* his ministry, in his very first sermon in Matthew's Gospel -- that the kingdom was "coming near" (4:17). Well, it is *still* "coming near", is *still* becoming **visible** to us -- in however fleeting a glimpse -- and **accessible** to us, by way of even the narrowest opening of a "door", no matter for how short a time. Are we waiting for

these **opportunities** *for* the kingdom, the **possibilities** its drawing near *creates*, i.e., in the **right** way, in a way which makes us *ready to discern* it, and *respond*?

Or, have we -- really -- **given up hope** of this?

What might lead to *us*, the Church whose **fundamental orientation** in this world is one of **waiting** -- *waiting* for Jesus, *waiting* for the kingdom to come in all its fullness, *waiting* on "justice to flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Am. 5:24) -- to being found, at some critical moment -- to have **too little oil**?

Is it **disillusionment**?

I remember going to my *first* appointment as pastor in 1986. I asked my D.S. about what **the "plan"** was for this congregation, thinking that surely there was a "plan" or, i.e., some **strategy** for this congregation, one which the Bishop had appointed me there to help the people carry out. It turned out there was no plan. All he told me, when I asked about the plan, was, "Visit the people." That's it. That was the plan. I was, I will be honest, disillusioned.

Maybe some of you are disillusioned about church, in our culture general, or about St. Matthew in particular, especially those of you who have been here since this congregation's "glory days" -- now some 35 years ago -- when, according to the records, there were 350 people, on average, in attendance in this sanctuary on a Sunday, easily *double* what there is now (or was in pre-COVID days). Do you find yourselves **mystified** as to where those "glory days" went, asking yourselves and one another, "**What happened?**"

Why might we, the Church be found, at some critical moment -- to have **too little oil**? **Distracted**? When what we have *invested* ourselves in, does not *seem* to be turning out as we hoped, we can get *distracted*. So, sure, we *have* our **lamps**, and our lamps have a *normally adequate* amount of oil in them, but -- hey, I have a lot of *other* things to worry about, you know, than having not enough oil in my lamp!

Why might we, the Church be found, at some critical moment -- to have **too little oil**? Just **tired of waiting**. *Waiting wears you out*. *Especially* when you're waiting on some *good news* -- like in a hospital waiting room, or for a marriage, or other family relationship to get better, happier, healthier. I've been waiting since the 1960s for the world to embrace the political vision birthed in that era. You remember, don't you?

"Come on people now, smile on your brother.

Everybody get together, try to love one another, right now." -- "Get Together", The Youngbloods (1967)

What happened? Who could argue with this vision of human social life? And yet, here we are, 50+ years later, and I'm not seeing it. Will I **die** before I see a Church that has a single-minded commitment to work for that justice and

righteousness which the 8th-c. BC prophet, Amos, declared to be the essential mission of the Covenant People of God -- *now* the new, all-inclusive Covenant People of God called **the Church**?

One of the most influential Protestant theologians of the 20th-c., Reinhold Niebuhr, once pointed out: "*Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.*" **So, perhaps I will die before the Church I have been hoping for, and working for, comes into being.** But, by the grace of God, I hope the hope within me never dies, and that -- maybe -- I will always be able to inspire it, to some degree, in others.

Our bishop, Jonathan Holston, issued a statement Saturday afternoon, after the race for the presidency had been called for Joe Biden. His statement acknowledged the extraordinary level of **acrimony**, and **anxiety** over the 2020 election, and was a call for the Church to help all those around us move forward from this point. It read in part: "Living as followers of Christ in a world which often seems like it's going in the other direction...takes hard work and **persistence**...Our foremost duty is to remain grounded and steadfast in our faith. **That means not giving up on the hope of the gospel**...We are called to remain **vigilant** – always on alert for **opportunities to respond** to the physical, emotional and spiritual need that surrounds us...

What I hear Bishop Holston saying is that, in times of **uncertainty** -- *such as ours* -- when we don't know *exactly* what to do, Christians do what we **know**: we love God with all we have, and our neighbors as ourselves. We feed the hungry, heal the sick, clothe the naked, visit those in prison. We see, and welcome, Christ in the stranger. We live *now* as if the kingdom of heaven is *already* here in its **fullness**. **Living this way is, in fact, what finally helps the kingdom come.**