

November 12, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church - 24th Sunday after Pentecost

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*Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.
Matthew 25:13*

The parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. [*Sigh.*] Over the course of 12+ years of preaching, I've had the opportunity to preach on this parable maybe four or five times. And as I reviewed the sermons I've preached previously, I find I always mention the same thing – how I don't like this parable. How I wish Matthew had left it out of his gospel. How I think it raises more disturbing questions than it answers.

So, for the sake of consistency and continuity, let me tell you again: I don't like this parable, I wish Matthew had left it out, and the questions that it raises are disturbing – not in the “let me dig deeper” way but in the “this makes no sense to me” way. Like, why didn't the bridesmaids with the extra oil share it with the others? By the time the unprepared bridesmaids notice their lamps sputtering out, the group sees the bridegroom's entourage coming. Surely, there would have been enough oil to go around and light all the lamps in time to welcome the bridegroom. Is what separates those who get to be part of the great wedding banquet from those who don't simply a matter of proper planning or thinking ahead or selfishness? Where's the grace? Where's the forgiveness? And if this parable is, as some critics suggest, really about spiritual preparedness – something that

can't be poured out and shared – then maybe it would have been better not to use lamp oil, a shareable commodity, as the metaphor.

O.k. Rant over for this lectionary cycle.

Instead, let's think about the gospel writer's audience at the time. What are the concerns and anxieties of the community that Matthew is trying to address? Because we need to remember that the gospels are not reporters or documentary makers, taking note of everything that Jesus said and did, the order he said and did it in, and repeating it back verbatim. They are picking and choosing the stories they know or have heard about Jesus, and weaving them into a narrative for a community that probably never met the man.

For Matthew's audience, they are struggling in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans. They are Jewish Christians (although they wouldn't have called themselves that) – who can no longer live in what was once their homeland, and now, in the diaspora, they are being pushed around again, this time by other Jews, the ones that don't believe in Jesus as the Messiah. They've been told and are holding out hope that Jesus is going to come back and bring about the Kingdom they've heard so much about, but they've been waiting on this promise for a long, long time.

Jesus died in about the year 35, the temple was destroyed in 70, and now it's year 80 or 90. They're losing hope. Their lamps are dying out, waiting for the second coming of the long-expected bridegroom, Jesus.

And so Matthew shares this parable – about waiting – to encourage his community not to lose heart and hope. To keep those lamps filled, trimmed, and burning bright. To not give in to the pressure from their Jewish brethren to drop their silly faith in that rabble-rouser Jesus who died 50+ years ago: *What are you waiting for? Where's that Messiah of yours now?*

Matthew uses Jesus' words to uplift his audience, knowing that the in-between time – the time between the present and the glorious thing they long for – seems vast and desolate. In the in-between time, when we're waiting for a problem to resolve or for relief from an anxiety, things like hope and faith can be thin, slippery bits to hold on to, while the lure of cynicism and despair seem like solid, sure things.

So, what about us? How are we to read this parable now? For most of us, we're in a rather different place than Matthew's intended audience; except for a few folks who periodically announce that the end of the world is going to happen tomorrow or a week from next Thursday, we don't much think about Christ's Second Coming in imminent

terms. But, like those earliest Jewish Christians, we do know what it is to wait, don't we?

Even in our world where so much happens so fast – almost instantaneously – we still have ample opportunities to wait. Waiting to find out about a new job; waiting to hear of a loved one's safe arrival after traveling; waiting for test results from the doctor's office; waiting to find out if your apology has been accepted and a relationship restored.

As different as each of those circumstances are, running as a common thread through all these waiting occasions are anxiety, stress. Fear. The discomfort of the unknown. Even if the thing we're anticipating is something good, it can feel uncomfortable to sit in that in-between void. So, how are we to respond? What was Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, trying to tell those long-suffering, long-waiting Jewish Christians? I think the answer wasn't so much in the parable's perky yet vaguely threatening summation – Keep Awake! Because you never know! - but rather, in the placement or the timing of the telling of this parable.

Because, you see, this part of the gospel takes place after Jesus' triumphal return into Jerusalem, and just before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Jesus, too, is in an in-between place, waiting, as it were, for the proverbial other shoe (sandal) to drop. He knows the Roman and religious authorities are closing in on him, strategizing how best

to take him out. And what does Jesus do while he waits to be arrested? He doesn't freeze in fear or inaction; he doesn't moan or worry or play out endless what-if scenarios – no, he carries on. He continues to do what he's been called to do: preach and teach and heal. He continues to be a leader for his disciples and other followers, continues to point them toward the right things to do, the right ways to be, even if those actions and ways of being don't seem to be the most prudent or logical.

Like Jesus, and like those 1st century early Christians, we don't always choose our circumstances or our timelines for whatever it is we're waiting for. But we can choose what we do, how we act, in the uncertain in-between time.

As I thought about waiting, and approaches to waiting, two images came to mind. The first was of my one dog, Frankie – my little gray guy. Frankie's most challenging waiting comes at meal time. Twice a day I head out to the garage, retrieve the containers in which I store the food, and then head back into the kitchen. Both dogs know that's the time for them to start their active waiting; Augie, the black dog (who isn't much of a chow hound) often wanders off at this point – he'll come back and get his food eventually – but Frankie sits at attention, on the threshold between kitchen and family room, watching and waiting as I measure out the kibble.

Frankie's approach to this time can best be described as extreme joy and active anticipation. His body wriggles excitedly, he sniffs the air, he drools, he moans and whimpers, and never takes his eyes off me. If life were like a movie musical, I imagine him breaking into song, like Tony in West Side Story, singing, “*Could it be? Yes, it could. Something's coming, something good, if I can wait. Will it be? Yes it will. Maybe just by holdin' still, it'll be there!*” Frankie knows me, he knows the routine, and trusts that I'm going to come through with his meal, but still he throws himself whole dog-heartedly into those 3 long minutes of waiting and food preparation.

The second image of waiting that comes to mind (which also happens to be food-related) has to do with a famous Japanese sushi chef named Jiro Ono, who was the subject of a documentary film 5 or 6 years ago, called *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*. Jiro is 85, and continues to run a tiny 10-seat sushi bar housed inside of a subway station as he has since 1965. Although the restaurant has earned 3 Michelin stars – the highest restaurant rating possible – Jiro is still in his own in-between place, anxiously waiting to produce the thing he most longs for: perfect sushi. His approach to this time between now and perfection is to continue to work at his calling. He thinks about how he's been in the habit of massaging, for 30 minutes, the octopus he serves his guests, and so he tries a 45 minute massage and then observes patrons as they eat this delicacy, to see if the increased time devoted to octopus preparation has moved him closer to perfection. He

learns which of his customers are right or left-handed, then rearranges the seating in order to serve them better, and make each person more comfortable so they have an experience ever closer to perfection.

What are *you* waiting for right now? And how are you dealing with this in-between time? Whether you're approaching it with the joyful abandon of my pup, with the methodical deliberation of a sushi master, or with the anxious struggle of first-century Christians, know that God is in that threshold space with you. Your community is called to be with you there, too, as Paul reminds the Thessalonians – to encourage one another, with word and prayer and action.

One theologian summed it up this way,

“Yes, that is our role as the church. 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. In all these ways, we encourage each other with the promises of Christ. That’s what it means to be Christ’s followers, then and now. And

that's why we come together each Sunday, to hear and share the hope-creating promises of our Lord." [David Lose, *In the Meantime*, Nov. 3, 2014]

As best you can, keep your lamps full and lighted and burning – the promises of God's Kingdom *are* coming. But if your lamp light grows dim, find someone else, and share their light. There's no reason for anyone to sit alone in the dark. *Amen.*