

Sunday, November 12, 2023
24th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 27A

Matthew 25.1-13

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1041250710402994>

(Sermon begins at about 22:20)

“Being Attentive in Our Lives of Faith”

Who doesn't love a wedding? A joyous occasion bringing together two people into a shared life of love for and commitment to one another; in which those being married make their solemn vows to one another in the presence of God and the assembled family and friends. Most certainly cause for great joy and celebration.

While weddings may be joyous occasions, the timing of this story about a wedding banquet may initially seem a little strange. Particularly when you consider where we are in the course of Jesus' life and ministry. Which makes the telling of this parable all the more significant. Jesus has already made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where he will undergo his Passion. In the Gospel narrative, it is now only two days before the celebration of the Passover. Two days before the Last Supper. Three days before his crucifixion. Jesus is taking advantage of what little time remains to be with his disciples and give them some final instructions and teachings to help get them through what is to come. A key feature of this is foretelling the coming of the Son of Man. Another term for the Messiah. Specifically, discussion of his impending return, following his death and resurrection, of course.

Our Gospel reading for today uses the image of a wedding—or more precisely, a wedding banquet—to provide a teaching about the end of the ages and the long-awaited coming of the Messiah. This was not new or unique to Jesus. This was an image that had long and deep roots in the Jewish culture. The ancient prophets, particularly Isaiah, compared the coming of the Messiah, which would usher in an age of peace and joy, to a great wedding banquet for all people. Which does make a lot of sense. A marriage ideally being a permanent commitment to a new life in union with another, just as the coming of the Messiah signals a new life for the people in their relationship with God through God's anointed one. Jesus uses this well-known comparison in several parables: the parable of the king giving a wedding feast for his son, which we heard four weeks ago, and again in today's Gospel.

In the context of the parable, as in ancient prophetic references, the coming of the bridegroom was an analogy for the coming of the Messiah. Of course, the early Church recognized that Jesus is the bridegroom, the Messiah. In the parable, the fact that the groom—that Jesus—was delayed in his return could have several explanations. It could be “an allegorical reference to the early church experiencing Jesus' ultimate return as ‘delayed.’”¹ After all, the early Church thought Jesus was going to return almost immediately after his resurrection and ascension. As time went on, and still no return of Jesus, people started getting a little concerned, seeking explanations. It is possible that this parable was written back into the Gospel record to provide

an explanation for the apparent delay. Or not so much an explanation as a message of how to deal with the delay.

Or, the parable could just be the recognition that, as Jesus notes previously in Matthew's Gospel in reference to the anticipated coming of the Messiah, "about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mt 24.36). Perhaps Jesus' way of reiterating to his disciples and the broader church that there is no way of knowing when Christ's return would actually happen. But not to worry. It will happen. We just don't know when.

Now, to break down the imagery Jesus uses. Just as in our time, the wedding was followed by a reception, a banquet, celebrating the newly married couple. It was customary following the wedding for the groom to go to the home of the bride and to take her to the groom's father's home, where the banquet would be held. A symbolic act of taking the bride from her old home into her new home; taking her into her new family. Part of the ritual involved was to have bridesmaids with lamps lighting the way to the groom's father's home, welcoming the couple to their new home and to their new life together. Once the couple arrived, all would go into the house and the banquet could begin.

As we heard in the parable, the bridegroom is delayed. Not knowing when he would arrive, the bridesmaids keep their lamps burning. Finally, the cry goes out, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Cue the bridesmaids and their lamps. But we have a problem. Due to the delay, the oil is running perilously low. Fortunately, five of the bridesmaids had the foresight to bring extra oil, just in case there was a delay. But five of them do not have enough oil and need to go get more. While they are off purchasing more oil, the bridegroom and his bride arrive, greeted by the five wise bridesmaids. They all go to the father's house and the banquet begins. And because they were not prepared, the five foolish bridesmaids arrive late and are not admitted.

The wise women in the parable seek to embody the joy inherent in the coming of the bridegroom—in the coming of the Messiah. They are prepared to welcome the Light of the World with their own light. And following that, to participate in the banquet that is to follow: the wedding banquet celebrating the arrival of the bridegroom and his wife being a foretaste of the heavenly banquet celebrating the coming of the Messiah and our arrival at our new home that is the kingdom of heaven.

With the parable being about the delay in the coming of the Messiah, regardless of the reason for the apparent delay, the parable is meant to be an image for how we as those who await the coming of the Messiah, actually wait. With the bridesmaids representing us—representing those of us who await the coming of our Messiah. In this, the parable really asks the question, how do we wait? Be it several days or several millennia.

Unlike some parables, Jesus explicitly states the lesson we are to learn. He ends with the words, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Recognition that precisely because no one knows the day or the hour of the Messiah's coming—not even the Messiah himself—all who wait on him are to be vigilant. In this, the "parable points to an ongoing way of

being in the world: continuously prepared and expectant, mindful and perceptive, patient and ready—in a word, ‘awake.’”²

Of course, as is often the case with Jesus’ parables, there is a word of caution. It would be easy to focus on the distinction between the wise and the foolish bridesmaids—to seek to translate this distinction into the real world. Based on their actions that person is obviously wise; that one is obviously foolish. And, of course, we all want to think of ourselves as wise as opposed to foolish. As those who, of course, are awake—as those who are prepared and ready for when Christ does return. Although a better way to view this parable, and to view the bridesmaids, may be as presenting poetic symbols representing the wise and foolish sides of ourselves. Because we all have both sides within us.

Although maybe wise and foolish are not the best terms to use. Maybe more like attentive and distracted. I know personally, I certainly have those times where I am very attentive, focused on what needs to be done. But then there are those other times when I get distracted—by other important matters or by insignificant details—and then things can slip through the cracks. We can’t all be attentive 100 percent of the time. And in reality, what are the chances that we will happen to be attentive to the right thing at the right time. Particularly with so many concerns and demands on our time. And then there are those times when we just get tired and our attention wanders.

This is equally true in our spiritual lives. As people of faith, we seek to focus our attention and our intention, so that we may be more prepared, more attentive, more vigilant, to God’s coming into our lives on a daily basis. Providing us with the grounding in our life in Christ, in our relationship with God. Providing us with tools we need to help keep us on the right path, to strengthen our relationship with God. That is what Church and what we do here is about. Through our acts of praise and worship, through our study of Scripture, through our practices of prayer and meditation, through our acts of hospitality and service to others, and with the guidance and support of our siblings in faith, we seek to build and strengthen our relationship with the Divine. Urging us, prompting us, to be more aware of and attentive to how God is acting in our lives. Preparing us for how we can remain attentive as we await the ultimate expression of our relationship with the Divine: the coming of God’s anointed into our midst.

¹ “Light and Delight: SALT’s Commentary for Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, SALT, November 6, 2023. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/11/2/taking-joy-seriously-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-third-week-after-pentecost>.

² Ibid.