

Matthew 25:1-13

Sermon on the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

This is the point in our church year where the readings on Sundays start to sound very – Advent-ish. They refer to watching and waiting and we begin to hear references to the themes of Advent - the anticipation of the Nativity of Jesus Christ and also the anticipation of the Second Coming at the end of the age. This is because around the fifth and sixth century, there was a practice in the church of observing seven weeks of Advent – from after the Feast of St. Martin on November 11 until the Nativity on December 25. Some churches are reviving the practice of a seven-week Advent, and of course our lectionary is ready-made to accommodate that with these types of readings.

The passage that we heard today from the Gospel of Matthew is a story of anticipation. It points to an event for which we believers must be ready – the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. I have heard some preachers shy away from the idea that this parable refers to the End Times, because let's face it not many listeners in the pews want to dwell too much on the End Times. It's gentler, and more comforting, to interpret the story of the Ten Bridesmaids as a story of being ready for Christ at all times in our daily lives. That is a very valid alternative way of looking at it, for sure, but it is pretty clear that Jesus' primary emphasis in telling this story was on his Second Coming.

This parable is part of the Olivet Discourse, where Jesus speaks privately to his disciples on the Mount of Olives in several parables about the coming of God's Kingdom after a period of tribulation. The discourse is found in all three synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. All of the Gospels were written at least 40 to 80 years after Jesus' resurrection, and they were written for an audience that was eagerly awaiting Christ's return. Many of the first believers had thought he would return within their lifetimes, and the new generation of believers were starting to wonder why Jesus was delayed in his Second Coming.

This parable anticipates that delay. In the story, the bridegroom, who represents Jesus, is delayed in reaching the bridesmaids who are supposed to serve as torchbearers to escort him into the wedding banquet. Jesus says of the bridesmaids “Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.” He points out that the foolish bridesmaids took no extra oil for their lamps and the wise bridesmaids took flasks of oil just in case there was a delay. Sure enough, the bridegroom is delayed for so long that the foolish bridesmaids’ lamps go out, and they have no more oil. They ask the wise ones for some oil, but they say “No! there will not be enough for you and for us.”

The bridesmaids in this story represent the followers of Christ. They wait for a period of time which seems reasonable to them for the bridegroom to return, but he does not return in that amount of time. He is delayed and they have no idea when he will return. Just like the early believers, they had an expectation of what the timing would be. Jesus told his followers he would return, and from that moment on they set about trying to guess when that would be.

Jesus reminds us in this parable that it is not up to us to try and figure out God’s timing. We are not in charge of when Jesus will return. Only God knows when that will be. It is one of the many reminders that God is always in charge.

The wise bridesmaids have plenty of oil to keep their lights going until the bridegroom returns. Theologians debate the meaning of the oil in this story. Some say it symbolizes good works, some say it is the commitment of the believers to Jesus, and but the idea that resonates with me is that the oil represents faith. This scenario invites us to ask ourselves: Do we have enough faith to wait as long as it takes for Jesus to return? Some believers do have enough faith, just like the wise bridesmaids, and some do not. Many become discouraged as the years add up to hundreds, then thousands, and they give up on the idea of Christ’s Second Coming.

But then there are those of us who keep the faith across the generations. We believe, as it says in our Nicene Creed that “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

The bridegroom returns at midnight while the foolish bridesmaids are out trying to buy more oil, and so only the five wise bridesmaids get to accompany him to the wedding banquet. When the foolish ones arrive, the door to the banquet is shut. I think that rather than being a harsh, cautionary tale of nonbelievers being prohibited from being in Christ’s kingdom, this represents the fact that when we shut the door to Jesus, and we fail to keep the faith, we exclude ourselves and we miss out on the joyful, wonderful banquet of Jesus’ love. When we allow ourselves to be distracted from God or to wander from the path of discipleship, we do ourselves a tremendous disservice. The punishment is our own.

The last section of the catechism in the Book of Common Prayer has a wonderful title. It’s called the Christian Hope. It asks:

Q. What is the Christian hope?

A. The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world.

Q. What do we mean by the coming of Christ in glory?

A. By the coming of Christ in glory, we mean that Christ will come, not in weakness but in power, and will make all things new.

And so we watch, and we wait, and we keep the faith – not in dread of the End Times, but in joyous expectation of a new creation. We await that happy wedding feast to which we are invited, because we, know that there is something better, something that transcends the world we see now. We keep the faith because we are Christians, and we are a people of hope.