

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
"The Ten Bridesmaids"

Scripture: Matthew 25:1-13

Opening Hymn: Come, thou almighty King

Closing Hymn: We are God's people 472 or O Jesus, I have promised 569 or Lo! Christ comes with clouds

Children's Hymn: Give me oil in my lamp

Choruses: Jesus Messiah or You are my king

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The queue, the line-up is full.

And there is only one agent at the counter.

As time passes you can sense the frustration
around you brewing.

People are checking their phones and watches.

Some are tapping their feet.

Suddenly the person in front of you stomps away angrily
Muttering curses under his breath.

We all hate waiting.

We all hate waiting.

And yet some of us have discovered ways
to manage extended delays.

Next time you are stuck in a waiting-room or lobby,
Stop and notice what the people around you are doing.

Some will be working on a novel,
others will be chatting on their phone.

There will likely be one person
Who has knitting needles and yarn on her lap.

Of course, any good management of delays
Comes down to our expectations.

If we know there's going to be some waiting,
We will do our best to be prepared.

But if we expect to wait to wait on our doctor,
Or the agent at the Telus store,
Or the young man changing our tires,
Should we expect to wait on God?

Should we expect to wait for all those promises God has made?

PAUSE

Now there are some parts of life of faith
That offer immediate benefits.

When we hear the Good News that Christ died for our sins,
When we welcome this news and embrace it,
We experience deep joy and gratitude.

This gift of forgiveness and reconciliation
Is received at the doorway of the life of faith.

And yet there are other gifts, other promises
That don't always come so quickly.

Jesus promised to bring us life:
Life in its fullness.ⁱ

As you endure a new round of chemotherapy
You might wonder when this promise is coming.

We are told that God is inaugurating a new era of peace and justice:
with swords being beaten into plowshares
and sorrow and mourning fleeing away.ⁱⁱ

And yet the brokenness in our families
And the suffering we encounter on the news,
Show us that these promises are yet far away.

In the life of faith, we need to hang on for the long-haul.
When it comes to God's promises we often have to wait.

This can be seen in today's passage:
"The Parable of the Ten Virgins",
Or "The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids" following the NRSV.

Yet another parable about weddings!

To understand this passage it is helpful
to know a little more about Middle Eastern wedding customs.

In Jesus' day "Guests assembled at the home of the bride
and were entertained by her parents while waiting for the groom.

When the bridegroom approached, the guests, including the bridesmaids,
lighted torches and went out to greet him.

In a festive procession,
the entire party [then] walked to the groom's home
where his parents were waiting for the ceremony
and the extended banquet that would follow..."ⁱⁱⁱ

This is the normal sequence in a Middle Eastern wedding.

But what happens in today's parable
is that the groom is holding up the process.

He's late.
He's so late that all the bridesmaids who are waiting for him
Eventually fall asleep.

Finally at midnight someone wakes them with a shout:

"He's here!
The bride-groom's here!
Go out and greet him!"

And so, the ten bridesmaids get up and make their lamps ready.
But some quickly discover
The hadn't brought enough oil for the long delay.

They attempt to beg and borrow from the others,
But as there isn't enough to go around.
And so they are forced to go out looking
for a 24-hr convenience store.

In the meantime, however, the procession continues without them.

When these unprepared women finally make it to the groom's home
The doors are already locked, and the banquet has begun.

"So stay alert." Jesus concludes.

"You have no idea when he might arrive."

Jesus of course,
is not talking about weddings.
Jesus is talking about his return.
Jesus is talking about the arrival
of the fulness of God's kingdom.

While some of his parables emphasise that the kingdom
may arrive sooner than expected,
Here Jesus cautions that there could be a delay.

Now keep in mind Jesus IS telling us
that those promises of shalom and healing and restoration
are certain.

The story maintains that the bridegroom arrives,
He doesn't skip out on the wedding.

But Jesus is also telling us, warning us,
That there may be a delay in his coming.

That is, those promises we are looking forward to
May not come as quickly as expected,
So we had better be prepared for the long-haul,
We'd better be prepared to wait.

So how can we be prepared?

Here the parable isn't so helpful.

If this parable is an allegory
we aren't told what that 'oil' represents.

But elsewhere in Matthew Jesus speaks about light,
Which is a reasonably good connection
to the lanterns of today's parable.

"Near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount,
Jesus instructs, "let your light shine before others,
so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

At the end of the same sermon, Jesus reminds,
"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,'
will enter the kingdom of heaven,
but only the one who does the will
of my Father in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

[Drawing a connection between these two passages
We might begin to understand the 'oil'] as faith,
good works, [spiritual] practices, or spiritual reserves

that remain constant and shine
during good times as well as times of waiting...

This explains why the bridesmaids cannot share their oil.

Just as we cannot share spiritual reserves,
development, or preparedness,
the bridesmaids cannot borrow the resources needed.

Being prepared to welcome Christ is [in this sense]
an individual matter..."^{iv}

It involves engaging in daily, habitual, spiritual practises.

At the same time

It cannot be denied that the bridesmaids of Jesus' story
do indeed wait together.

And in this we see a picture of Scriptures' admonition to:

"not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing,
but encouraging one another
—and all the more as you see the Day approaching..."^v

Jesus wants us to know that God's promises are true,
God's kingdom will come in its fullness.

And he wants us to know

That you might have to wait a lot longer than you expected.

So next time you are frustrated with your frail and ailing body

Pick up the Bible and remind yourself of God's eternal promises.

The next time you are lamenting what is awry in your family

Bring your hopes for them to God in prayer.

The next time you are depressed by yet another news story of injustice,

Do something caring for your next-door neighbor.

Even better, consider gathering with other Christians
So you can do 'good works' and worship together.

In exercising your faith and shining your light
You are preparing yourself to wait for the fullness of God's kingdom.

In practising your faith and shining your light
You will discover a storehouse of oil
That will never run dry.

Amen.

ⁱ See John 10:10

ⁱⁱ See Isaiah 2:4 & 51:11

ⁱⁱⁱ John M. Buchanan "Matthew 25:1-13, Pastoral Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*.

^{iv} Lindsay P. Armstrong "Matthew 25:1-13, Homiletical Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*.

^v Hebrews 10:25 NIV