

Working and Waiting

I Thess. 4:13-18 Matthew 25:1-13

We have wished, we have watched, we have worked, we have waited. Are we ready? This is the question that the bridesmaids leave us with. The gospel of Matthew is full of these kingdom parables that Jesus tells, each one seemingly more cryptic than the next.

Culturally, the story of 10 bridesmaids and a bridegroom doesn't make a lot of sense to us. And even if we do understand the cultural context of these people waiting outside in the dark, much is left out of the parable.

How did they get ready for this big event? Did they shop for a gift? Did they prepare the food? Decorate? Maybe they prayed for the bridal couple. Certainly, the bridesmaids must have spent some time primping. All we see in the parable is that some of these attendants prepared by bringing extra oil for their lamps and some did not. And now all that's left is waiting for the bridegroom to arrive for the consummation of the marriage. No sign of the bride in the story though.

We have wished, we have watched, we have worked, we have waited. Are we ready? This week, 12 years ago, the world witnessed what seemed unthinkable for that time, the son of a Kenyan man and a woman from Kansas was elected president of the United States...You remember the time, right? We seemed ready to be part of the healing, part of the work of racial and economic reconciliation...Here we are 12 years later... Never, never would I have thought the country would be so racially fractured...Were we then and are we now remembering where our true hope lies?

Though many of us may have been inspired by Barack Obama then and others today inspired by Donald Trump, neither are the new messiah, neither are the bridegroom. Each will disappoint...each are human. As Christians our true hope and trust lies in this other bridegroom, this other party for which we prepare. It is bigger, wider, and deeper. Our hope has been promised, sought after and lived out for generations and generations: it is the love, justice, and peace of God.

Okay, back to the wedding parable. These bridal attendants had a job to do: to welcome the groom as he came to meet the bride. They were to light the way for him as he approached and then they could all go into the great feast and party. Presumably, these attendants have done the first part of their job, preparing for the day, and getting themselves beautiful. Now there is nothing to do but wait...For some reason, the groom is delayed. The writer of Matthew and that community were familiar with delays. They knew about Jesus' promised return and they were waiting. "It should be any night now," but every morning they woke up - as we wake up...still waiting.

During this waiting, what do they do? They work together to help usher in the reign of God for which they wait. They do the work to which they have been called by the groom; they heal the sick, visit those in prison, feed the hungry, share a cup of cold water...They refuel themselves with prayer and meditation, so that they can continue waiting until the bridal party arrives. Certainly, there is no shortage of work to be done while waiting.

While reading this scripture, I understood the waiting part, but had always gotten hung up on the part where the wise attendants prepare their lamps and the foolish half of the group discovers that they don't have enough fuel. The foolish ask the wise to share their lamp oil and they will not. The wise respond, "If we share, then maybe there won't be enough for us."

This seems to go against everything we have been taught about sharing with each other, about spreading the wealth. Didn't we learn that Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive? (Acts 20:35) How can these "wise" ones turn away those who do not have oil?

One of the commentaries I read in preparation suggested that the oil used to prepare for this great event is not a commodity to be bought and sold. The parable leads us to believe that if the foolish would only go to the market (at midnight in the dark?), they will be able to buy what they need. But the oil represents the work of faith that they have done in prayer and fasting; in serving the poor; in tending the sick; in carrying out the mandate Jesus gave for followers of the Way.

This kind of preparation is quite individual; while we can work with each other, we cannot transfer our faith and work from one person to another. We each have to pay attention to the world around us and respond as we are called. We each have to find the way that prayer and refueling works for us. We have to consider what is around us, listen inside of ourselves and follow the call of God to a life of faith and work.

Now, this doesn't mean that we never rest. Sabbath is an important principle. Rest is part of preparing for the long wait. After all, there is no judgment made on the wise and foolish for sleeping when they are tired. But it is not just about sleeping; it is about what we do when we are awake. The wise, plan ahead, refuel, and are ready for the long haul. The foolish do not fuel themselves, body and soul, for the long wait.

If we want to be lenient with those who procrastinate or don't plan ahead, the text doesn't allow it. The story tells us that the foolish knock at the door to the feast and the one who answers says, "I don't know you." This kind of judgment is harsh and it seems cruel. And yet we, who think we have it all together, we're not immune from making these pronouncements, in our heads if not out loud.

It is the tendency to play the judge that makes it hard for us to identify with this parable and the text from I Thessalonians. Many of us are relatively well off; it is hard for us to understand what it is like for those in the Congo or Nigeria or Syria amidst almost constant war or those in Porto Rico or Haiti or Cuba who endure tragedy and hurricane, month after month; year after year. It stretches our imaginations to identify with those in Darfur, Colombia, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

For those who live with conflict and racism, abuse and sexism, torture and imprisonment, those who live with chronic illness and pain, a promise of resurrection, like that in I Thess., from this death-filled existence is good news. For those whose lives are so miserable that they would rather sleep day and night, than wake to another day of darkness...the promise of waking to see that everything has changed - is amazing. Paul gives the assurance that someday life will be joyous, trumpet playing, and shouting. This is the hope and promise that the prophets have preached for generations and generations.

How do we, who live a reasonably cushy life, wait in eager anticipation with those who live a hard life? How do we stay true to the persistent call to walk together, to keep working, to stay alert and awake? How do you and I prepare for something that seems so distant, that has been promised as immediate and yet is not here yet? How do we live here and now yet prepare with those around the world for the great promised feast?

There are plenty of invitations to us every day. We don't need to look across the world to see those who suffer. We need only watch and wait and prepare. Let us work now, while there is light, so that when the darkness comes we have oil enough to keep our lamps burning bright. Amen.

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