

Are You Ready?

Matthew 25:1-13

Few human events are more weighted emotionally than weddings. Parents invest heavily—time, energy, creativity, resources, love, and hope—in the marriage ceremony for a beloved daughter or son. Because they are so loaded with emotional content, weddings are actually fragile events, with lots of potential for mishap, and even disaster. For one thing, the main characters—the bride, the groom, and their parents—are stretched thin, and deep feelings come easily to the surface. There are tears at weddings, and profound hope, but also sometimes anger, resentment, and frustration. In the midst of all that, things can go wrong and often do. In private conversations many clergy share stories of wedding near-disasters: the groom that was at the wrong bus stop, the best man got lost and never made it to the rehearsal, the bridal dress was the wrong size, the flowers were not delivered, the groom forgot the license.

It is significant that near the end of his life, at the time for summing up, Jesus chose this most human, emotionally loaded event as the context for a parable about the kingdom: "The kingdom of heaven will be like this."

It helps us to know a bit about the wedding customs of the day to understand the parable. Weddings in Jesus' day were every bit as emotionally freighted as ours today, with the same potential for mishap. 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 walked to the groom's home where his parents were waiting for the ceremony and the extended

banquet that would follow and continue for several days. We remember that Jesus, his mother, and his disciples were guests at such a wedding in Cana.

In this parable, for whatever reason, the groom did not show up on time; the hours pass, and many of the waiting wedding party fall asleep. Finally, at midnight, they were awakened with a shout, "He's coming." The bridesmaids leaped into action, trimmed their lamps, and headed out to meet him. Five of the ten had used up their oil and had no reserves. Their attempted to borrow some from their wiser, more prudent sisters was rejected. Frantically, they set out in search of oil, not easy at midnight, and in the process missed the procession. When they finally arrived at the groom's home, they were locked out and dismissed. "Keep awake," Jesus concluded, "You do not know the day nor the hour." Staying alert, waiting purposefully, being prepared, are the messages here.

The early Christians had to adjust to the reality that Jesus did not return as they fully expected, and that their mission was to wait expectantly and in the meantime live faithfully, courageously, and hopefully. This faithful waiting is our mission still. At the heart of our faith is the certainty that human history has a purpose and a goal and that it is moving toward eventual fulfillment and completion. We do not articulate it very well, and (in fact) sometimes we avoid this topic because of its abuse by popular end-time preachers and teachers, who sell lots of books describing the end of history in graphic and (mostly) violent terms and who focus on the end times to the neglect of this time and this world.

That is not the point here. The point is living expectantly and hopefully. Christian hope rests on trust that the God who created the world will continue to love the world with gentle providence, will continue the process of creation until the project is complete, and will continue to redeem and save the world by coming into it with love and grace, in Jesus Christ.

Christian hope is as big as the whole sweep of human history, but also as small as each individual. Ultimate issues have been resolved for the human race, but also for each of us individually. In every congregation and in this congregation are faithful people genuinely frightened about where human history seems to be headed. Freedom, justice, and compassion seem fragile in the face of the forces of oppression, injustice, violence, and torture. Living in hope does not mean immunity to the harsh realities of history. On the contrary, it means living confidently and expectantly, trusting that the Lord of history continues to come into our lives with compassion and redemption and hope.

The challenge here is to keep enough oil on hand for the lamps when the bridegroom appears, to roll up our sleeves and work for the kingdom that is always coming and breaking into history.

Also in every congregation and in this congregation are people genuinely afraid for our own personal future, perhaps facing serious illness, surgery, or loss of employment. We, and each of us, need to hear the good news that the bridegroom will come, that the love of God will continue to appear in our lives in surprising and unexpected ways:

- —We are ready when we believe Jesus Christ comes when Christian people live in hope and never give up.
- — We are ready when we believe Jesus Christ comes when faithful disciples express love and compassion and work for justice.
- — We are ready when we believe Jesus Christ comes when critically ill people know they are ultimately safe in God's love.
- — We are ready when we believe Heaven breaks into earth when faithful women and men live in hope and give ourselves to the work of the kingdom.

We can remember that Jesus is the one who is coming, who has been approaching from all eternity. **John M. Buchanan**

Against claims that there will be nothing new under the sun, that we live in the last age, and that from this time forward it is only a matter of our working out the niceties of how to live in the kingdom that is already here, the text reminds us that this is not as good as it gets, that the bridegroom's delay does not mean he will not come, and that the party will not really start until he arrives. Jesus asks us to be ready; to live in hope for what has been promised and what will be but is not yet. Our text reminds us that knowledge, faith, and love are tools for living in this time before eternity, not tools to gain entrance into it.

So how are we prepared to wait; how do we get ready? It does not consist of stockpiling weapons, canned goods, or canned answers to questions about Jesus' return. Rather, to be ready is to gather with others who also wait—and stick with them. We are to avoid communities that are caught up in prognosticating about God's timing. While it is wise to fill our lamps with good things, we should remember that those things are for use this side of eternity. There is already more than enough light at the banquet. **Mark Douglas**

Let us be ready for the bridegroom's coming!

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