

Pentecost 23A, Proper 27. November 12, 2017.
1 Thessalonians 4:13-19; Matthew 25:1-13

I have preached a lot of mass shooting sermons in my short time here. I have preached enough of them that it's hard not to be a little formulaic. Christian truth hasn't changed much in the three years I've been here and American idolatry has only become more entrenched. The formula goes something like this: evil is real and is very close, we are not pure but we have a hope that is, we cling to that hope and simultaneously do the long hard work of changing the world while we engage in loving each other and our neighbors in small ways every day. It's a good sermon, but it breaks my heart to give it once a month—and my sermons really only take on the high profile cases.

It is important that we continue to let our hearts be broken by the world, because when it no longer hurts, it means that we have become fully at home here among the wickedness and have forgotten that hope of God's coming reign that animates our life together and our collective action in the world. It is the hope that Paul taught to the Thessalonians in their mourning. He tells them to mourn, yes, but to do so with hope. That hope is in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our assurance that the love of God is stronger than death and the forces of death.

As always, I reassert this hope this morning, a week after an American murdered dozens of faithful folks at prayer in Texas. And as always, this hope is founded in faith, but is not restricted to some sweet hereafter with no impact on our lives now. As Christ was resurrected in his body here, on earth, at a cave outside Jerusalem. that resurrection is our hope also here now, in our beautiful endangered bodies. God's love is stronger than death and the forces of death even now. And though this culture may kill us, it will not turn us into itself. It will not silence our persistent witness to the always coming kingdom of God, our bold naming of sin, our invitations to join in being redeemed.

Today's gospel is especially apt for a week such as this, because a major theme running through this parable is "waiting." But as we have been waiting for our rulers to do something besides offer thoughts and prayers, the waiting of the parable is for nothing less than the return of Christ himself. It is one of several parables meant to address the perceived delay in Jesus' return. As you may remember from the Easter season, Jesus rose on Easter Sunday, hung out with his friends for a while, and then took off on a boat of clouds, promising to be back soon.

It was the universal expectation of the early church that when Jesus said "soon," he meant something like what we usually mean when we say "soon." This turns out not to have been right, apparently, and the delay causes a lot of distress for our oldest siblings in the faith. Paul is addressing it in 1 Thessalonians—the saints are beginning to die, which wasn't supposed to happen because Jesus was expected back within a generation. Notice that Paul seems to expect that some of the Christians in Thessalonica who first heard this letter will still be alive when the time comes.

By the time the Gospel of Matthew is written some twenty years later, the problem has only gotten more acute. In this allegorical parable, the bridegroom is Jesus and the bridesmaids are the church. It's a cautionary tale: the groom is late for all of them; all of them fall asleep; but some made provisions for a late arrival while others didn't. So yes, things are taking longer than we expected—make sure you're ready when he does arrive.

The parable of course has some things that make us nice liberal folks a little uncomfortable. We don't like it that the bridegroom won't let the late bridesmaids in. We don't like it that the so-called wise bridesmaids won't share their oil with the so-called foolish bridesmaids. We wonder why Jesus can't be a bit more like we would prefer, like a mix between our own affable grandfathers and Jimmy Carter. On the other hand, most of us have been to enough weddings to recognize this as potentially normal wedding party behavior—the groom is late, the bridesmaids are fighting, eventually the groom and bridal party have a fight, and someone gets kicked out of the party . . .

It may help to know that this is the last week of Jesus' life and so the parables and teachings are getting more confrontational. We are very near the crisis of the crucifixion. And it may help to know that the original point was indeed just to deal with the apparent delay of Jesus' return. The scarcity logic of the bridesmaids and the terminal forgiveness of the bridegroom don't actually have to tell us very much about God's kin-dom.

For this to speak to us today, we might look especially at the movement in the parable from expectation to ethics. The parable is written to deal with the delay of expectations, and the response is a call to ethics. Why is Jesus delayed? No answer is given, but the response is an injunction to do the work of faithful waiting and preparing. We might ask the same question today and receive the same response. Our salvation is coming—we don't know when—and so we have the work to do of staying ready, of keeping ourselves prepared for the Lord's party.

We can do this differently from the wise bridesmaids. In fact, we should. From what else we know about the Christian life, the wise bridesmaids fail as completely as the foolish ones. They have done the work of making sure that they have what they need, but it's hard to find many places in the New Testament where watching out for yourself ahead of others is considered the faithful approach. The general witness of the gospels is the opposite of the wise bridesmaids approach. The Christian life is not about protecting your own, but putting your gifts to work for all of God's creation. This parable tells us to be ready for a delay, but it does not tell us what faithful preparation looks like.

As we continue to wait for the end of our country's addiction to gun violence, faithful preparation cannot look like a withdrawal to protect ourselves. Nor can it be a purely passive waiting, laced with the saccharine pleasure of cynicism. Faithful waiting for our salvation from America's love of shooting each other must be a matter of hopeful action that affirms that every person is a precious creation in God's own image—and so their murder is not just sinful it is sacrilege that affronts us in the very core of our being. What each of us does in service to God's people in the world will be different. Not every one of us will agree on policy solutions, and that's fine. But we do share the same hope that God's love will defeat death, and that hope impels us to act, even as we pray: come, Lord Jesus. Amen.