

Proper 27 (A) Matthew 25:1-13

When a couple wants to get married in an Episcopal church, it is customary for them to spend quite a bit of time with the priest or minister before the wedding. There is a deal of pre-marital counseling, discussion of the religious meaning of marriage, and then of course the planning of the liturgy. I have always thought that this gospel passage would be a particularly good entry for a priest to make in discussing the actual day of the wedding. It brings up some very important points that the wedding planner may have missed: will the groom arrive before midnight? How much oil are we going to need to keep the lights on? How late do the local oil vendors stay open? And then of course, can we talk about these *ten* bridesmaids?

Now obviously this isn't actually a text teaching us about weddings. I think that what's really going on here is an illustration of what happens when things go wrong. Historically, we have this story because the early church, our parents in the faith, had a problem. It is very similar to the problem that Paul is addressing in First Thessalonians. After Jesus was executed and then raised from the dead, he eventually leaves. But everyone expects him to come back soon. The fancy theological word for this is the Parousia, the second coming. Jesus has gone away, but he will be back and will establish a world whose foundation is justice and whose law is love.

It seems like most of the earliest Christians believed that this was going to happen, and that it was going to happen very soon. There is an urgency of mission among the first Christians—you can see it in the book of Acts—that is driven partially by a conviction that this world is running out of time. That Jesus will be back soon, and the in-between time will be over. But then . . . the world doesn't end. It gets to be 30 years after Jesus' resurrection, and then 40, and soon the first Christians are all dying off, and still no return. Eventually, there is no one left on Earth who actually saw Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh. And this is a problem for these earliest Christians. If they were wrong about the timing of Jesus' return, then what else were they wrong about?

Paul addresses this problem in relation to the faithful dying. The church at Thessalonica didn't think these people were going to die—Jesus would be back before that happened. But there's been a delay. And so Paul writes to tell them to grieve, yes, but to grieve with hope. Neither of these things is particularly in fashion today: the act of grieving or the assurance of Christian hope. For Paul, Christians can grieve properly precisely because they can hope more deeply than some others. We have hope that is stronger than death, but we really do have to encourage each other in this hope, because Christian hope isn't meant to be done alone. In our hope, we are caught up together in the presence of Christ.

Matthew is maybe less direct in dealing with this delay—here Jesus tells a parable, a kind of cautionary tale about delays and readiness. Jesus' return may come at an unexpected hour, and so we must be ready for surprises, and for the long haul. I think the original intention is pretty directly about the second coming of Jesus, but today the text can speak to us a little more broadly.

If you've ever been involved in a wedding, then you know that usually quite a bit of planning goes into them. And this wedding is a wedding planner's worst nightmare. This story can be a case study in what happens when our plans, especially our plans in the church, go wrong.

In this wedding Jesus tells us about, it's no one's fault that the plans get messed up. Judging by the fact that the wedding still happened, I think we can assume that the groom had a good reason for being so late—I know that I would be a bachelor if I had turned up for my

wedding at midnight without a very good excuse. And it is not the fault of the so-called foolish bridesmaids that the groom doesn't show until midnight. The fact that things go wrong here is not the fault of anyone we know in the story. The question is not why things go wrong, but how we conduct ourselves when they do go wrong. What we do when things are not quite ideal, are not quite the way we expected—when the situation doesn't seem set up perfectly for us to succeed.

No one from the bridal party covers themselves in glory. The parable itself is very hard on the bridesmaids with too little oil, so let's start with them. In a straightforward sense, the parable is warning against being unprepared, specifically against the kind of short-lived faith that can easily get very excited in the short term, but isn't deep enough to last the whole night.

But in a broader sense, the problem is not that they failed to bring enough oil, but that they had left when the groom arrived. Was it really that important to have enough oil for their lamps? Rather than heading out to find an all-night oil emporium, couldn't they have just waited until the groom got there, and then stuck close to those whose lamps were still working? It wouldn't have been perfect, but the lamps aren't really the point of the wedding reception, are they? The lesson I take from this is that when things don't go according to plan, when salvation isn't coming quickly enough, when the person we expect is delayed, we cannot afford to get caught up with insisting that non-essentials be perfect. It is possible to be paralyzed by a preoccupation with perfection. Instead, we must be prepared to join the party of the kingdom of God, even with our imperfections.

But the so-called wise bridesmaids aren't particularly impressive to me, either. They, too, fall asleep, and I don't really blame them for that. And yes, they brought a flask of oil, which turns out to have been prudent. But I'm appalled by their attitude toward the rest of the bridal party, perhaps because I recognize it in myself. When the wedding plans get messed up, and their friends are therefore in need, they respond by counting up their resources and deciding that they only have enough to fend for themselves.

We've all at least seen this tendency, and I suspect that most of us have been guilty of it. When times get tough, we check to make sure that we ourselves are okay, and then devise plans for how we can keep ourselves in the place we want to be. This usually involves keeping what we have, and wishing those without good luck. This is the sin of the wise bridesmaids, of those of us who have enough: it is finally a failure of hope. When we say "If I give, there will not be enough left for me," whether we're talking about love, oil, money, time, food, or anything else of value, we are ultimately failing to believe in the hope that is stronger than death, the hope that Paul talked about, our hope in Jesus Christ.

Now here's the thing about life and making plans: things are never going to be perfect. Things are never going to go exactly according to plan. We will always need a little more oil, and we will always have a reason to fear, to guard that which is our own and refuse to give, refuse to love, refuse to act. But here's the thing about the wedding reception, the party that is the kingdom of God: it will happen anyway and is already happening anyway. God calls us, the church, to spread the message of God's kingdom of love now, and to share our love and food and gifts from a place of hope, not fear—whether we're in the situation we planned for or not. Our hope in God is greater than our imperfections and greater than fears. Therefore encourage one another with these words. Amen.