

Church in the Wild: Waiting Together Well

Matthew 25: 1 - 13

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The worst wedding I ever officiated was the first one.

First mistake: Arriving two hours before the ceremony. That's too long to wait around feeling nervous.

Mistake number two: Asking my not-yet-wife Brooke to come as my date. As an introvert, attending a wedding where she only knows the officiant, was tortuous.

Mistake three: Saying yes to the couple's invitation to stay for the reception. What I've learned is that most couples invite the officiant to be polite, but don't really want a religious person around when partying really gets going.

They seated us at one table until we got bumped to another by late-arriving guests.

Then we got bumped again, but this time to a folding table in an adjacent room with the wedding coordinator.

20 minutes later, we decided it was time to go and I made my fourth and most grievous mistake.

I found the groom, congratulated him, and thanked him for inviting us to the reception.

He thanked me for the "lovely ceremony," then told me that in the morning he and his new bride would be going on their honeymoon: fly-fishing in the Seychelles.

Then I went and found the bride. "Congratulations. Thank you so much for inviting us to the reception. I hope you have a wonderful time in the Seychelles."

"Wait. What?" she said.

"Good night," I said, waving, as Brooke and I left the party.

Like I said. Worst wedding ever. Headline: "Officiant ruins honeymoon surprise."

I.

Near the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells a story about a wedding.

10 bridesmaids are waiting for a newly married couple to return to the groom's father's house.

No, they're not dressed in powder blue chiffon, but they are dressed in their finest.

Not the coarse cloth of everyday, but smooth fabric with the ornate hem.

Their hair is expertly contained under a simple, yet elegant, cloth covering.

A shiny bracelet on their wrists and a bit of color on their faces. They are, you could say, dressed to impress, because these young women are there not only to provide hospitality to the couple, and not only to participate in the wedding banquet to come, but to position themselves to become the next bride. Upon arrival of the bridegroom and his new wife, a crowd of guests will follow, including many possible mates. It was in the interest of these young women to look their best and to act their best, and to outshine their competitors, who are, of course, the other bridesmaids.

But there is a delay. The couple do not arrive when expected. No word has come of their whereabouts. Night is falling, so they trim and light their lamps for safety and orientation in those pre-electricity days. When I was in high school, some of my friends and I loved exploring limestone caves near Santa Cruz. To this day, I shudder to think what would have happened if our flashlights had completely given out while we were crawling deep in the dark of the earth. That's what happens to the bridesmaids. The oil in their lamps gives out in the dead of night. But that's okay because they brought extra vials of oil. Well, half of them did. 5 of them had oil to refill their lamps when the short delay turned into a long delay. These 5 Jesus called wise. The other 5 he called foolish. These 5 were prepared for the wedding. They were even prepared for a delay. But they weren't prepared for an *extended* delay. "Give us some of your oil," the foolish ones said to the wise ones. "No. Then we won't have enough. Go buy your own." The response of the wise ones strikes the listener as both prudent and a bit cold. As my mom used to quote to me, "Lack of planning on your part does not constitute a crisis on my part." Perhaps the wise ones were teaching the foolish ones to take responsibility for themselves. Actions, or lack of actions, have consequences.

The consequence was that, in the exact moments that the foolish bridesmaids were fetching more oil, the bridegroom and his new bride arrived. The doors to the party were opened, the guests streamed inside, and the outer doors were shut. When the 5 foolish bridesmaids arrived with more oil for their lamps, it was too late. The bridegroom didn't want to open the door for the ones who weren't there to greet him at the moment the banquet began.

II.

Delay. Extended delay. Not knowing. Worrying.

Wondering if we would have enough in the tank to survive the long wait.

It's been a week in America.

The parallels between the parable we've just heard and the week we just had are striking.

I admit I was among those who hoped for, and even expected, a swift resolution to the election.

But there was a delay. And not just a brief delay. An extended delay. It seemed to go on forever, disrupting sleep and testing patience.

The delay we've experienced signals that approximately half of Americans are experiencing profound defeat and all the emotions that come with it.

The bridesmaids were divided 50-50, and so are we.

The bridesmaids were pitted against one another, competitively, for the affections of a powerful man, and so are we.

The bridesmaids were depending on a limited resource to get them through the night, locked in the greedy and suspicious calculus of a zero-sum game, and so are we.

The outcome of the Parable of the Bridesmaids is that half of the them were welcomed into the party and half were locked out.

Reminds me of our politics, a winners-take-all brawl between red and blue.

How did we get here, and does it have to be like this?

Consider what could have been accomplished with the \$14 billion spent on this election.

The reality is that our economy leaves out many more than 50% of the population.

Our laws continue to cause disproportionate suffering and uncertainty among the poor, people of color, queer people, immigrants, women, children, people with mental illness, people with disabilities.

The world of competition described in the parable and brought to the fore in our 2020 election is the world we live in everyday and it is a world where injustice and exclusion appear almost always to have the upper hand.

It is a world in which many more than 50% get left out in the cold.

III.

It is into that world that Jesus tells his parable.

He is sitting on the Mount of Olives, which overlooks Jerusalem.

The dried salt of his tears is still visible on his cheeks.

A little while ago, he sobbed over the city that commits violence against those who dare to tell the truth about injustice.

Tensions are high. The day before, Jesus erupted in righteous anger at the exploitation he saw in the temple.

Since that moment, some religious leaders have been questioning his authority and his intentions.

Now as dusk descends, Jesus and his disciples watch the lights come on in the windows of the city below.

Jesus realizes what the disciples do not yet realize: the writing is on the wall.

For the sake of God's love, Jesus will have to put his body on the line.

He will have to suffer and die, to empty himself for the sake of the world, to submit to death so that God can defeat it, to be laid in a dark tomb until daybreak on Sunday morning.

Looking at his disciples and loving them, Jesus wants to prepare them for what is to come, not only the fear and grief of the coming days, not the only the shock of hope that comes with resurrection, but the long, slow delay that marks the time between the first Advent of Christ at his birth and the second Advent of Christ when he returns to make all things new.

Wanting to teach his disciples how to wait together well, Jesus tells them the parable of the bridesmaids.

"The kingdom of heaven will be like this," he begins.

A party. A banquet. A cause for celebration. An event worth waiting for. A feast of joy worth the preparations.

Imagine it. Food that delights. Music that enralls.

A new community formed beyond the old divisions.

People of every type rejoicing in each other's company.

"The kingdom of heaven will be like this," Jesus says, echoing the words of the prayer he taught, "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

God is preparing this extravagant party against the backdrop of a world in which we remain divided, competitive, and mostly unprepared for the possibility of anything new.

Jesus tells his disciples this parable in order to prepare them for what is coming, for his grotesque death on the cross, for the Saturday of sorrow, for Sunday morning full of questions and appearances, for 40 days of resurrection presence, for the sending of the Spirit, known as the Comforter, and for the long days and weeks and months and centuries and millennia of the church.

He's preparing them for the delay.

He's strengthening their resolve.

He's stirring their imaginations.

He's warning them against complacency.

He's tantalizing them with a promise of a party to end all parties.
He's showing them what it means to wait with expectant hope.
He's describing what it looks like to wait together well.

IV.

Earlier this week, my daughter Sophia asked what I was preaching about this Sunday.

"The Parable of the Bridesmaids," I said, "Ever heard of it?"

"No," she said, so I told her the story.

"That's mean," she said when she learned that the bridegroom wouldn't let the 5 foolish bridesmaids into the party.

At first, I thought about defending the details of the parable, something along the lines, "Well, you get what you deserve."

And then I caught myself.

Perhaps Sophia was right. (After all, the name Sophia means "wisdom.")

Perhaps Sophia was voicing what Jesus intended for this parable to do, to question the 50-50 split when the kingdom of heaven comes.

"The kingdom of heaven will be like this," Jesus says.

"Be prepared for the delay," he says.

"Learn the art of waiting together well," he says.

Don't be foolish like the foolish bridesmaids. Bring enough oil to last you through the night. You belong at the party.

Don't be greedy like the wise bridesmaids. Bring an extra measure of oil in case someone else needs it. Everyone belongs at the party.

And don't be ungracious like the bridegroom. A shut door can always be opened again. Everyone belongs at the party.

Delays are hard.

Long delays are excruciating.

Long delays in expectation of something wonderful like a wedding feast, or a change in leadership, or justice fulfilled, or the kingdom of heaven require generosity, patience, and community.

"You are the light of the world," Jesus says. "Let your light shine"

And Jesus provides an abundance of oil for times of waiting.

Jesus provides the oil of stories worth retelling for centuries.

Jesus provides the oil of friendship and companions who care.

Jesus provides oil of strength to question and to protest what is not just.

Jesus provides the oil of patience and trust in a God who patiently waits with humanity for the revealing of the children of God.

My favorite image from last week was a video of African American voters in Philadelphia.

Wearing face coverings and standing 6 feet apart, they were waiting in line to vote on election day.

But not just waiting in a line. Dancing. Doing the shuffle. Cheering and encouraging each another.

God's Spirit moved so that these voters would turn a civic duty into an act of praise. The kingdom of heaven broke through just enough to help them make the most out of a fraught process.

In the spirit of the first disciples, God inspired these voters to turn the act of waiting into a joyful act of hope.

The church is a community that is waiting together well,
not just standing line,
but dancing,
doing the shuffle,
cheering and encouraging each another.

Why do we do this?

Because we need to be prepared for the delay, and because everyone belongs at the party.

Amen.