

Keeping Awake

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
November 9, 2014 Stewardship Sunday

Matthew 25:1-13

A chaplain at an all boy's prep school preached a sermon in the Sunday chapel service on the text we heard this morning. Toward the end of his sermon, he asked a rhetorical question: "Young men, I ask you, where would you rather be? Here, in the light, at the feast of the bridegroom, or there, out in the dark, with a group of foolish young girls?" The young men immediately responded with shouts of, "Out there, in the dark, with the girls, sir!" And, says the chaplain, that was the end of that sermon. It certainly didn't take those boys long to make a decision...to decide what mattered most to them.

And I believe that is what is at the heart of our text – this parable is all about making a decision. I called this text a parable, but it really is more of an allegory – all the important elements in the story standing for something else. The wedding banquet is a symbol for the coming Kingdom of Heaven. The long-awaited bridegroom clearly is Jesus, and bridesmaids, well, you and me - those believers waiting for Jesus' return. So this story must be all about the second coming of Christ, right, the end of the world and all that...right? Well...no. Clearly many in the early church were waiting for the return of Jesus, an event they thought would happen very soon. Well, here we are these many centuries later, still waiting. Says one scholar, "It must have been difficult for those who first heard these words in Matthew's Gospel to stay awake. One can almost feel the tension sagging as Matthew's church settled in for the long haul. Jesus' promised return would not happen soon it appeared. The kingdom would be delayed. And you and I have never known a time other than that of a kingdom delayed. And so we, like the bridesmaids, wait." But how do we wait? Does Jesus tell a story just about the future, or could he be talking about our lives here and now? Could it be that we are called to live our lives, to make our decisions, as if the Lord's day was happening, not at some time in the future, but this very day?

A pastor shares this story: "The other day a woman was telling me about an experience she had. She had been up all night caring for her sick child. Finally, close to dawn, the child went to sleep. The exhausted mother walked down the hall toward her bedroom. As she tiptoed to her room, suddenly there was a solid ray of morning sun breaking in through her bedroom window, flooding the room with soft light. She said it was as if there was a voice, a reassuring voice, saying to her, 'Peace, be still, all is well.'"

Says the pastor, "All I could say was, 'Wow! That's amazing! What did you think? Were you afraid or stunned or what?'

"She said, 'I remember thinking... well, I guess this is it.'

" 'This is what?'

" 'I thought, she answered, 'this is the day that Christ has come very close to me. I expected it.'"

What are we expecting today? The wise bridesmaids brought extra oil. What does that say to us? Says New Testament professor, Thomas Long, "The wise bridesmaids are distinctive not because they were ready for the groom but because they were ready for the groom's delay. To bring along an extra flask of oil is a signal that they were prepared for the bridegroom to come early or late. If the groom had come when he was predicted to arrive, then all the bridesmaids, foolish as well as wise, would have cheerfully greeted him and merrily waltzed into the banquet. But the bridegroom, like the Kingdom of Heaven, did not arrive promptly. He was delayed, and now, some two thousand years later, the kingdom is still delayed. The wise ones in the church are those who are prepared for the delay; who hold onto faith deep into the night; who, even though they see no bridegroom coming, stay awake and expectant, who still serve and hope and pray and wait for the promised victory of God. The wise bridesmaids represent those Christians who do not despair or turn away, but keep on doing the will of God."

The year was 1780. In New England, a day that started out as normal, gradually turned very dark. At noon it was as dark as early night. Not knowing what was happening, many people were very frightened. In Hartford, where the state legislature was in session, one member moved for adjournment, thinking that surely the day of God's Final Judgment had come. But another legislator stood up and said, "I am against adjournment. The Day of Judgment

either is approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish, therefore, for candles to be brought."

Rather reminds me of the words of that noted theologian, John Wayne. In the classic film, "Rio Bravo", his character sums up the essence of his cowboy philosophy by declaring to a less-than-perfect sidekick, "Just showing up doesn't get the job done." Jesus wants to know, what are you doing now, what decisions about your life are you making now, how are you living your faith and advancing the Gospel now. Are you just showing up, or are you doing your duty and remaining faithful? Today is the day for decision, as is every day.

I recall a story about told by a colleague. In his early years in ministry, he became very discouraged about ministry – about poor attendance at worship. (it happens!) He says, "I finally confessed my discouragement to an elderly, wise church member. She said to me, "When you think about it, it's rather amazing that anybody comes to church."

"Really?" I asked in puzzlement. Were my sermons that bad? Was church really that boring?"

"Think about it," she said, 'The church is forever forcing us to face up to questions we spend most of our lives avoiding. It talks about things we never talk about in daily life. Church can be a downright uncomfortable place for most of us at one time or another. No wonder people stay away.'" I suppose she could have added, particularly on a Stewardship Sunday. "Here he goes... asking for money again!"

But I am not going to stand here today and plead with you to help the church meet our budget. That should be a relief, especially for those of you who are visiting today. You already know that. When we get together the last Sunday in January for our Annual Meeting, you are going to see an ambitious budget - budget driven by program. You will see an increase in Lydia's time as she joins our staff as Associate Minister. This will mean more outreach to youth and families, more pastoral care, more outreach to visitors, and I suspect, new ideas when it comes to worship and music. You will see an increase in Rachel's time. We are so pleased with the job she is doing with our children - the Sunday morning program is growing... how can we cut back? Make no mistake about it. With this budget we are making a major investment in the future of our church: more extensive pastoral care, an ever-growing Sunday morning program for all ages, nursery, continued outreach with increased support of adult mission trips and homeless outreach, our ever changing and diverse church music program. All this and more! 2015 promises to be quite a year around here and your faithful – yes, I'll say it, your increased financial support, will be vital in helping it all to happen. But I don't want to linger here. Again, you already know the need. Rather let's get back to our text and the hard questions it asks.

The text makes it clear that our goal is not to meet a church budget. Our goal, our call, is to lead faithful lives, again to live as if we were going to meet Jesus right now and be asked by him to give an accounting of our lives. The great pianist, Arthur Rubenstein, was once asked why he continued to practice the piano so much. He replied, "If I don't practice one day, I know it; if I don't practice two days, the critics know it; if I don't practice three days, everybody knows it." A great talent, or even a modest talent, must be practiced, used and employed if it is to have any chance of finding expression, of making a difference. The same could be said for a life of faith. How are we using our lives to the glory of God and the help of God's people here and everywhere? It would seem that our Lord has great expectations for our lives and so should we. What matters most is not how much we have or even how much we get or give, but rather how wisely and faithfully and well we use what we have in the time that we have. The hard question asked by our text and the church is not, "Will you be ready to meet Jesus at the end?" but rather, "Now that we have met Jesus how then shall we live?" Yes, it really is decision time.

For a closing prayer, some words of John Wesley. When asked what anyone can possibly do for God's Kingdom, Wesley replied:

*Do all the good you can
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.*

Now we're talking stewardship; now we're talking life. Amen.