

Psalm 78:1-8 ~ Matthew 25:1-13

Keep Awake

November 12, 2017 ~ Stewardship Commitment Sunday

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Introduction to Scripture Lesson:

When? When will we get to go bowling? When will my delayed plane actually depart? When will he get better? When will she ever listen to me? When will I ever actually win the bid on my favorite auction item? "When" questions begin as soon as we learn a baby is due and continue to shape the contours of our thinking until our last day on earth. The catalyst for today's scripture was the big "when" question boiling over in Jesus' disciples' minds the day he came out of the temple for the last time, pointed back to it and declared to his disciples that one day it would be completely destroyed. Not even one stone would be left upon another. How frightening and alarming. So they asked, what we would ask, "Tell us when. Please! How long will it be until the Son of Man returns and the end will begin?" Just maybe he would leak the answer to *this* "when" question if they got lucky.

So Jesus, responded with everything *but* an answer to this "when" question. Instead, he taught them what they really needed to know, through a series of four perplexing and disturbing parables---none of which ends well for at least one, and in our case, half of the bridesmaids in the story. Yes, today's text is the second one in the series commonly called, "The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

Sermon

Seriously? The Kingdom of Heaven, that wonderful place of no more tears, no more pain, the eternal resting place, the "better place" will be like this? Let's be honest for a moment here, this story doesn't do much to recommend it. The bridegroom is late. Ridiculously late. The bridesmaids with the extra oil refuse to share it with their girl friends. Not a drop of oil, or an ounce of compassion for those loser bridesmaids. And even when they successfully procure the oil from a shop that is oddly open in the middle of the night, they are totally shut out, banished into the abyss of the underworld, by a groom who at that point proclaims that he doesn't even recognize them.

Tell us Jesus, where is the love? Where is your amazing grace in this vivid parable that sounds more like a nightmare than the Kingdom of Heaven? What were you trying to tell your disciples back then, and what are you teaching us here today? What's our takeaway message on this Nov. 12, our Stewardship Commitment Sunday? We're sure we don't want to be like the foolish bridesmaids. We get that. But really, what made them so foolish? And what made the other ones so wise? And how does this parable answer the disciples' question about when they might expect the Apocalypse to occur?

This parable is traditionally interpreted by equating the bridegroom with Jesus, and understanding that he is being autobiographical in the telling of this story. The wise bridesmaids are understood as Christians who are saved, who are in; and the foolish bridesmaids as those who are not saved, who missed the boat, they failed to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, and are condemned therefore to outer darkness.

Indeed the image of Jesus as Bridegroom and the Church as Jesus' bride is beautiful and right and true. And, it is definitely biblical. It originated before Christ and can be traced directly to our Jewish ancestors. In their tradition, they view God, the God of Israel, as the Groom and the people of Israel as the Bride. In this metaphor, the Torah stands as the marriage contract between God and God's chosen, beloved people. Yet, as beautiful and traditional as it is for Christians to see Jesus as the bridegroom and the church as Jesus' bride, I do not believe this parable was about that, originally.

Let's think about it together here. First, let's place it in the narrative world of Matthew, where Jesus is on the Mount of Olives, speaking privately to his disciples just before his final week on earth. Of course there was no church at that point. Even setting that problem aside and going with the church as bride, where is the church in this story? No bride is ever mentioned. This story is all about the bridesmaids and the groom. Would Jesus really say to five young girls, no matter how foolish, "Truly I tell you, I don't know you"? Another problem I see is how the traditional Christian interpretation of this parable can lead to an easy, one and done, self-satisfied interpretation. "Good thing I'm a Christian, that means I'm one of the wise bridesmaids. I'm in. That also leads us, tempts us to be judgmental and dismissive of all those foolish bridesmaids, i.e. people of other faiths. So that doesn't really line up with the full gospel message, if you think about it.

Nor does the widely held liberal interpretation do much better. The more liberal interpretation looks at this parable and says, the Gospel of Matthew was written after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. It's likely that Jesus didn't really tell this parable. Rather this parable was the work of the early church seeking to explain to its discouraged members the delay of Jesus' return. Most expected the Second Coming to occur within the next generation. This was most probably their answer to the "when" question for the early church. Although this historical and contextual understanding of Matthew's gospel is helpful and true, I don't think this approach gets it right, either.

So if this parable was not originally about Christ as the heavenly bridegroom; nor was it a creation of the early church to explain the delay of the Second Coming, what is it about? If you're thinking, "I know, I've got it: it must be about staying awake." That is the title of this sermon, after all. You're getting closer, but that's not the heart of it, either. No, it's not simply about a call to constant wakefulness. Let's think about how the story goes. All ten bridesmaids (the five wise ones *and* the five foolish ones) fall

asleep at the same time. And they all wake up at the same time; so falling asleep in this story could not be what separated the wise ones from the foolish. That could not have been their fatal mistake.

What is it about? "What if the parable is from Jesus, but is not autobiographical? What if the virgins are virgins, the bridegroom a delayed suitor, and the oil is just oil?" What is the message here? Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, renowned Jewish New Testament professor, scholar, and author asks this in her book *Short Stories by Jesus*,ⁱ and goes onto point out "if the only conclusion we draw from this story is "be prepared," (turning the first five bridesmaids into Boy Scouts...), Jesus wasted his time."

What is it about? I don't think Jesus was wasting his time, especially not at that late point in his life on earth. I do think Jesus was keenly aware that his precious time on earth was running out, and the door was quickly shutting on his chances to teach the disciples before he was crucified. I hear Jesus, telling them and us: You are asking the wrong question! It's not about knowing "when." Life is too short and too precious to burn all your oil asking the wrong questions and stressing on things that you can't know. Or waiting to act, to give, or to pledge until you get the answer to the "when" question. Instead, I hear Jesus telling his disciples and telling us, the key is this: "Be ready to do your part, before it's too late."

I get that from paying attention to the double-barreled dilemma of the foolish bridesmaids: they were out of oil *and* out of time. Let's start with the "out of oil" part of their dilemma. A little background to attune our 21st century ears to the wedding customs of Jesus' time. Back then, Palestinian weddings were the most cherished celebrations in an otherwise dreary life of exhausting work. For the men in the wedding party, these weddings involved foot races, camel races, games of skill, and lots of drinking... Some things never change. When the games and drinking ended, it was the custom for the groom to go to the home of the bride's parents, pay the bride price to his in-laws, and claim his bride. Then there would be a nocturnal, torch-lit procession in the company of the bridesmaids to the home of the groom's parents where the wedding feast would occur. The hour of the bridegroom's coming could not be predicted. It depended on how long the legal proceedings at the bride's house took, and how long the gaming went on. It was the job of the unmarried bridesmaids to illuminate the whole wedding feast; however long all of this would take.ⁱⁱ

One more piece to keep in mind, the Greek word "parthenoi" translated "bridesmaids" also meant "virgins" or "unmarried girls," who were probably no more than eleven or twelve years old. OK, so some of these eleven year olds forgot to pack extra fuel. Think about your 5th grader packing for a slumber party or camping trip. Not too surprising. Easy to do in the excitement of the big wedding. And then, to compound the mistake, the ones who did remember seem so mean. I have always been annoyed and put off by the "wise" bridesmaids who I thought sounded selfish there in

the dark, totally unwilling to help their fellow bridesmaids when they were fumbling around trying to trim their lamps.

It was Myesha, a wise woman who participated in the weekly Bible Study I led for women who live at the Dayton, Ohio downtown Y.W.C.A.. It was she who opened my eyes to another way of seeing this. All of the women attending this Bible Study have been victims of domestic violence, experienced homelessness and many of them, incarceration. It was Myesha who woke me up to the gospel truth shining through what I had seen only as negativity. We had read the story through two times, and I had invited the women to read the verse from this story that leaped out or spoke to them. After some silence, Myesha spoke up, "I like where it says, 'There's not enough oil for all of us! Go and buy some for yourselves.' I think they are telling those girls, you can't depend on someone else, you've got to get it for yourself. Your own light, your own lamp. Uh huh."

And it clicked in for me and for the group as we started talking: the banquet depended on the light from all ten lamps fully lit and fueled with ten sources of oil. Those five foolish bridesmaids had been each given an important part that could not be replaced or duplicated by someone else's lamp. The wedding banquet would go on, but it wouldn't be what it could have been, because five lamps were absent.

Drawing it closer: what about your lamp? Jesus needs your oil, your lamp to be burning bright. Without it, we are diminished. Are you asking the wrong questions, waiting for answer you are not meant to know, meanwhile running out of, or wasting your oil on perhaps worthy, yet less important stuff? Your lamp is like no other on this earth. You will go places you will see people, you have relationships with family, friends and strangers that no other person will have. God has given you oil to light and lighten, to heal and help, to redeem and reconcile in a way that no one else can. Everyone has been given an important part. Are you awake and ready to do your part? Before the door is shut?

I hear Jesus calling us to go ahead and do our part. The part that only we can do. Even if it seems unfair or lopsided. Why? Because we do know that Jesus loves us, right now. Always has and always will. And Jesus loves all the children of the world, always has and always will. Jesus hung on the cross for everyone, including that person you absolutely despise. That's the kind of God, the kind of Savior who saved us. And there is a banquet waiting, a celebration illuminated with plenty of light, a feast that God wills for all God's children.

Now let's look at the second barrel, the "out of time" part of the foolish bridesmaids double-barreled dilemma. Jesus' point here is that even though we don't know when, we do know that we don't have forever. Not on this earth, anyway. We don't even know what this afternoon, or what tonight will bring. Or if tomorrow will ever

come. That says to me, that keeping awake means going ahead and doing your part, before it is too late. Do your part sooner rather than later, today rather than tomorrow, because we are not going to be given the answer to the “when” question this side of heaven.

What does this mean for all of us today? There may be someone in your life that you have been neglecting or ignoring. Someone you know who could be lifted by some small attention on your part. Or you may be in a relationship that got broken in one way or another, and you’ve been meaning to reach out to that person, meaning to make amends, but just haven’t got around to it. Or maybe you were wishing that other person would just step up, instead of it always being you. When will he realize he is wrong? When will she make the move? Those are the wrong questions. I hear Jesus nudging us, “Don’t ask when, ask me how to help you to wake up to what your part is, now—before it’s too late.”

Just one more point today, to stretch us and broaden the implications of this parable. I hear this parable pushing us to extend this urgent call to do our part, beyond our immediate lives. I hear it asking us a haunting, but gospel-strength question: Are we doing our part, am I, are you, are we doing out part as the Body of Christ called “First Pres.”, to push back against the social sins of our generation: such as the sin of racism; and sin of homophobia, the sin of the of the increasing inequities among the rich and the poor here and across our land? Are we doing our part to push back against, to shine a spotlight on, the sin of global warming and the increasing threat to our delicate, intricate ecosystem God gave us to care for, to be stewards of?

Big, questions, and I know I have run out of time in this sermon, so I will end it with this: Jesus needs your oil, your fire, your passion, your pledge. For the sake of this whole world he came to save. When you come forward with your pledge and or offering during our offertory, if you have already pledged, let this walking forward be a chance for you to say “yes” with your body and your prayers, remembering your pledge. Pray to God saying, “Yes, help me keep awake and do my part. Not tomorrow, but today. Not later, but now. Before it is too late. Whenever that may be.

ⁱ Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parable of a Controversial Rabbi*, New York, New York: Harper Collins, 2014, p.302.

ⁱⁱ Walter Wink, “Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time,” *Hunger for the World: Lectionary Reflections on Food and Justice Year A*, Larry Hollar, Editor, Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 191