

Sunday, November 12, 2023
Amos 5:18-24; Matthew 25:1-13
“Everyone loves a wedding”
The Rev. Joan Wither Priest, preaching

A groom who shows up with the wrong-colored bow tie, a bride tripping on her gown, a best man fainting, a maid of honor sobbing uncontrollably. Every minister has their favorite wedding story. Everyone loves a wedding. Not long ago I did a wedding where the bride was over an hour late to the service because the theme of the wedding was the Disney Movie “Frozen” and her hair had to look just like the main character Elsa, complete with Tiera and mink stole, with floating glass crystals in vases all over the church. Or the One where the mother of the groom, a single mom who was having a **little** trouble letting go of her only son, showed up to the wedding in the exact same dress as the Bride – all but the train. The exact same white wedding dress! You can’t make this stuff up. More on that last one in a moment.

Everyone loves a wedding, especially a “picture perfect” one. But most weddings are not perfect, because like marriages, like life, weddings require a lot of work and no matter how much we prepare, how much we spend, how much time we devote, there is always something unexpected that happens.

Jesus loved to tell stories or parables about the everyday life of the people who followed him. He didn’t quote the religious philosophers of the day or the leading Rabbi’s from the temple; he chose things from people’s lives to talk about. He told stories about weeds and wheat, grapes and vineyards, fishing and fishermen’s nets, sheep and goats, coins lost, and sons found. And he talked about weddings. Many of his stories were to teach the people what the kingdom of Heaven was like, what their lives would look like if they followed the path of God. But notice this parable is a bit different. It starts with the Kingdom of Heaven **will be like this** not the Kingdom of Heaven is like, this one speaks to the future. As the prophet Amos does. This is more about the Day of the Lord, the Second coming of Christ and what **that** looks like. Because for Matthew, his followers were becoming anxious as the expected Jesus to return right away. The Prophet Amos speaks about what the people were actually waiting for, but Matthew takes Jesus’ parable and emphasizes the waiting part but not **why, why** we wait but **how, how** we wait.

Now in order to fully understand this story you have to have a knowledge of ancient Jewish weddings. In First Century Palestine, it was common for the bridegroom to go to the house of the bride, where the bridesmaids would be waiting. The bridesmaids would then go inside and get the bride, and they would travel through the streets to the home of the bridegroom, where the ceremony would take place. But back then grooms were busy working people and time was understood quite differently in the Middle East. So maybe the wedding was to start Saturday afternoon but sometimes it didn’t start until Sunday or perhaps even Monday. So, these bridesmaids had to wait for the groom, as long as it took.

We don’t know why this groom was delayed, but he was, and the bridesmaids got tired and dozed off. Long about midnight they hear a messenger, who was hired to run ahead, and shout – “the bridegroom is coming, the bridegroom is coming – get ready for the wedding!” So up jumped all the bridesmaids, straightening out their dresses, grabbing their lamps, trimming the wicks and lighting them – but half of the bridesmaids discovered they didn’t bring enough oil.

And because the wise bridesmaids wouldn't even share their oil, off went the foolish ones to find some oil. But when they returned, the doors to the wedding were locked and they weren't allowed in.

There is a lot about this parable we don't know. We don't know why the foolish ones didn't bring enough oil or why the wise ones wouldn't share even a little of their oil. We don't know why the foolish ones were locked out and told "I don't know you" by the groom. Unless we realize that this story isn't about the "why's", it's about the "how". Is this parable telling us to be ready for the judgment day – the end of time - the return of Christ because if we don't, we will be locked out of Heaven? Or is this telling us how we should live our lives each day – how to be ready in life – truly present to what's going on all around us, aware of how we are living for and in the Kingdom of Heaven? I think it's a little of both. So are we like the young maidens, out of touch with time, sometimes sleeping through life, sometimes confused, dazed? Are we on the other side of the door? Probably a lot more than we admit!

As one pastor writes, "we are part of a culture that practically worships planning and forethought and preparation for the unknown that lies ahead. We are a people who are always thinking one step ahead. We love our savings accounts and investments; our life insurance policies and the check-ups we know we must go to. I think it is why we get so angry when something goes horribly wrong: when the war goes badly or the budget is overspent or the emergency procedures turn out to be filled with holes: it looks like we haven't done our homework, like we're a bunch of fools who don't know what we're doing. Is the kingdom of Heaven really no different than the empires of earth, where we store up oil for our own survival?" (1) The Kingdom of Heaven is different, because we can't plan for God. God comes again and again in our daily lives, but are we asleep to it? While God's love and grace are free, it doesn't mean we can just sit back and watch for salvation – life is happening all round us, even now, God is happening all around us and we need to wake up! We need to keep awake because there is so much about life we can't plan for. Like Christ coming again.

As for the prophet Amos, he too speaks of living not only for the return of God but for much more right here, right now. Did you listen to that passage? If Amos wanted to gain the attention of his hearers, he certainly chose startling scenes. God as a wild, predatory animal? Or God turning the divine back on the church's liturgy? So what was really happening in this passage is the original audience felt harassed by the threat of the Assyrians and so they anticipated the mysterious "Day of the Lord" as vindication and triumph, a smiting of their enemies. And Amos turns their expectation on its head, saying the "Day of the Lord" you dream of will not be a crushing of your enemies, it will actually be a day of darkness and fear because of the way you are living right now.

If the animal imagery was meant to frighten the people, the words about worship were meant to shame them. The purpose of these verses? Was to shake the listener out of complacency. They cannot take God's love, care, and comfort for granted. Fear of the Lord, the Day of the Lord, means to be in utter and complete awe of the Lord. The harshness of these words and images was to proclaim God's final words in that passage – Our lives, our worship should result in justice which means fairness to the poor and oppressed; and righteousness which means healthy relationships and community. (2) This is how God sees the future, the Day of the Lord, the return of the kingdom of Heaven on earth. And there is an urgency to all of this, because life is short, and time is limited and we don't know when all this will happen.

We live under the myth that there is always time. Oh, we plan for tomorrow and the end of our lives in practical ways, but we miss today and ways to live as Christ's disciples in the kingdom now. We as followers of Christ, have only one task, one task, and that is to communicate joy – the joy of knowing Jesus Christ, of being loved by God – the joy we have in knowing we have the promise of eternal life. That's it! This is living in the kingdom, and it is not about preserving the future of our religion but keeping the light burning today. If we are active in our relationship with God, God will be active with us, and justice and righteousness will flow freely.

Anyone who has been married for several years knows that relationships are ever changing and need to be tended to. You can't just sit back and watch them from afar. They need to be nurtured and with the same virtues as our relationship with God and God's people needs to be nurtured – with kindness, patience, acceptance, forgiveness, love, and also with surprises and excitement, joy. When I meet with couples about to be married, I strongly emphasize the work that they have been through to reach that wedding day and how important it is for that work as a couple to continue, especially if they have children. I always say – strong couple means strong family.

And any relationship needs active participation by both parties. We can't say we believe in Jesus Christ and so now we're done. We've joined the church, so now let's just sit back and listen. God is always actively involved in our lives – are we actively involved in our relationship with God? Remember the wise bridesmaids never had to go looking for the bridegroom, he just appeared, with open arms, when they least expected it. Let us remember that Jesus was referred to as the groom and his church the bride, and if the oil is the Holy Spirit, who are the bridesmaids? Why that would be you and me. Do you have enough oil to keep the light burning?

The bridesmaids with the extra oil were prepared for the light and the darkness. They were prepared to face the darkness, to “stand in its midst, its dangers, its fearfulness – and equally prepared to then go into the lighted, warm, joyful house and join the party in all of its fullness.” (3) What Jesus is talking about here is the darkness and light of our lives, the spiritual oil we carry with us to help us see in the darkness. If oil brings light to the lamp, a light which brings warmth and comfort, what happens when the oil in your lamp runs out – when your light goes out and you have nothing to give? What replenishes your oil, your spirit? How do we find this spiritual oil?

Here, right here in our worship is a good place to start – hearing God's word, worshipping, singing, and praying. But maybe there is more to it. It is November and we are watching the plant world die around us. Leaves are falling, our gardens are empty of flowers and vegetables. We are preparing for winter and that makes most of us afraid for a long dark cold isolated time. So how are you keeping your inner light lit? What replenishes your oil? Are you awake to God in our mist, even in these shorter cooler days? Are you aware of the beautiful blue skies, the full moon, the colorful leaves, the bright mornings, days like today?! In this parable Jesus describes waiting as a journey, an adventure, which involves our effort. To keep our lamps lit, to be prepared for the presence of God at any moment, helps us in the dark times as well. The long winter to arrive. So what replenishes your spiritual oil?

Remember when the foolish bridesmaids turned to the wise ones and asked for some of their oil and they were turned down flat? Now you may think that response is pretty harsh and

not Christ-like, and yet the kind of oil we are talking about isn't just given from one person to another. As one pastor writes, there are some kinds of oil you can borrow but some you can't – you can borrow your neighbor's lawnmower, but not their peace of mind. You can borrow your friend's homework but not the hours they put into studying the material for the test. "And here's the thing, you will run out. Time will run out. The hour gets late, everyone gets sleepy. We all doze, we all put it off saying, one of these days I'm going to . . ." (4) The time will come that you will have to draw on the oil you have. Oh, as a minister how I would love to give that person who is faced with real darkness, faced with the fear of dying, faced with a terrible medical diagnosis, faced with the loss of a loved one – and give them some of my small store of spiritual oil – but I can't. Oh, sure I can give encouragement, be there with them, offer prayer and support, but the journey is their own and it isn't easy or quick – it's a process, practiced day after day - acceptance, survival, commitment.

But let's face it, we are an impatient people, a distracted people. We hate waiting. And we are very bad at waiting. If we are in that dreaded line at the DMV, sitting in a doctor's office waiting room, in line at the grocery store, how often do we take the time to notice our surroundings, who is standing near us, what is happening around us? Being awake, aware. Why would we? Most of us have cell phones to text on or play games on or check our all-important email. When I travel, I just can't figure out why so many people have to be constantly talking on their cell phones in public. Did you know they are trying to make a new violation for those who text while walking? It's a terrible problem in NYC, the number of accidents is silly. We don't know how to wait; we don't see a need to notice what is happening around us.

The word for us today is not – be prepared but keep awake. The Kingdom of God is not about our "lack of oil", our mistakes, our deficient faith, our spiritually empty lives. It is about waiting, noticing, looking for the bridegroom. God will appear in our waiting. Christ will come again. All we need to do is be ready to receive the joy given to us, the comfort bestowed upon us, the good news we hear, the love we feel, and go out there with justice and righteousness in our hearts.

So, I ask, is there oil in your lamp and is it burning? Because we will trip and fall and sob and faint in this life, but we can't miss the joyful wedding banquet, the Kingdom of Heaven right here, right now. In June of this year, you know wedding season, I was flipping through the morning shows and one was talking about crazy wedding survival stories. And I hear this woman say, "about 20 years ago in New Canaan, CT my soon to be mother-in-law shows up to my wedding wearing the exact same wedding dress as my own, except for the train." I stand up and say – I did that wedding! And she says, "and now we are the best of friends." Whew! Everyone loves a wedding – are you participating in this one? Amen.

(1) Florence, The Rev. Anna Carter Florence. "Filling Stations," 11/4/07

(2) Aaron, the Rev. Charles L. Commentary on Amos 5:18-24. Working Preacher.com

(3) Peterson, The Rev. Sharyl. *Lectionary of Homiletics*. p. 55

(4) Florence.