



THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

NOVEMBER 8, 2020

MATTHEW 25: 1-13

"HURRY UP AND WAIT"

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like young women who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' "Then all the young women woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' " 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The young women who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. "Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!' "But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.' "Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

SERMON

Last weekend I prepared our yard and gardens for winter:

Raked the leaves

Mowed the grass

Edged the grass everywhere

Pulled up most of the annuals. I just couldn't bring myself to pull up the last of the calendulas.

I cleaned up the urns

Pulled up my red pepper plant

All this was in addition to previously:

Raking the leaves

Storing the bird bath and fountain in the shed

Putting the garden hose away



Cutting down our three tomato plants

I've gotten better preparing for winter as I've gotten older

Have you ever tried to wind up a long garden hose after the weather has turned really cold? One time was all it took and I never wanted to do that again.

Or raked leaves after it has snowed?

No fun.

And then, as I wrote this sermon, we are waiting to know who our next president will be....

Hurry up and wait, right?

The original meaning of the word wait has to do watching with hostile intent, to lie in wait for, or to plot against?

Then later, the meaning shifted a bit to "watch out, be on one's guard?"

It sounds like wait developed as we began to consciously prepare for experiences that might be surprising, threatening, damaging, or puzzling.

Here's a more positive example from an etymology dictionary: "when speed is the best of a horse...the jockey plays a waiting game; that is, he carefully nurses the horse through the race, so as to not distress him by over pacing him; as the finish approaches, he creeps up to his horses by degrees, but does not go in front till he sees that the pace has made them 'safe,'—when he lets loose and wins."

Here we see the connection between being prepared and waiting. The jockey is poised to make his move, but waits until the right time....



Waiting is somewhat of a spiritual discipline. Learning both to wait, which has to do with self-reflection. And then being prepared, which has to do with action.

Practically, my yard and gardens are prepared as I wait for winter.

Our states are prepared to count the votes as we wait for a victor.

And in all this, waiting has this undertow of hostility or being on one's guard.

As is often the case with the teaching of Jesus, waiting has to do with being awake and alert....

As we near the end of the liturgical year, the ancient church left us with this teaching about waiting—being awake, staying alert. Making preparations.

This theme will be echoed in a few weeks when we usher in the season of advent, which introduces the new church year: again, wake up! Be alert! Wake up! Prepare the way of the lord!

So, wake up and wait, but wait having prepared yourself.

There is an actual art or discipline to waiting appropriately.

Today, it seems many don't like to have children wait to decide what they want to do with their lives. I hear example after example of the anxiety carried by adolescents concerning what they will do with their lives.

If pressured to make a decision at a young age, we call this premature closure.

A teenager has not had enough life experience to make an informed decision. Psychologically, we consider this one of the important decisions of a young adult, not adolescent.



My dad made sure I worked physically demanding jobs as a teenager. Like spending the summer walking behind a city truck dumping hot tar mix on the roads to be spread by yours truly. Heat beating down on me from the sun and heat rising from the road. An experience that taught me I did not want to work these kinds of jobs. With each shovelful of hot tar mix, college looked better and better.

But we can also wait too long.

It's a little late for me to decide I would rather be an attorney or that deb and I should have a baby. I have waited too long. Rather than premature closure, this is profound procrastination.

So, one commentator on this gospel speaks of the need for patient presence and wise waiting....

Matthew is writing his gospel decades after Jesus has left the scene. The early believers had been patiently present and wisely waiting for the return of Jesus. What we call the second coming.

They were beyond ready to be removed from this world into a spiritual kingdom. They were tired of suffering the slings and arrows of the world. They were tired of waiting and were losing their patience.

We know the feeling, don't we?

I recall a zoom meeting in March, sponsored by our synod with an infectious disease expert who suggested that COVID-19 would not begin to clear up until sometime in June.

And we all thought "June!?"

And now we're five months past June, with cases rising, with winter on the way, and with some states already having taken various measures to close things back down.

Hard to be patiently present and to be wisely waiting.



And, with the second coming nowhere in sight, one new testament scholar sarcastically states that the early church looked expectantly for the return of Jesus, but what they got instead was the church.

So, we can be prepared and wait, and things may still not turn out as we like.

The scene in our gospel focuses on preparations for a wedding banquet that is to take place in the home of the groom. A great crowd of family and friends fills the house and pours out into the street.

The groom and the wedding party go to the home of the bride across town. The bride is seated on a donkey and the wedding party sets out for a loud, disorganized, and joyful parade. Maybe they tie tin cans to the tail of the donkey.

The parade travels as many streets as possible so that everyone in the village is aware of the upcoming wedding.

In the middle east, weddings take place during the seven months of the hot and cloudless summer. The parable takes place at night, so we are told there are ten young women with their ten lit lamps.

Experience says these wedding parades often take longer than expected, so five of them think ahead and bring along a small clay flask filled with extra oil. Five of them, perhaps in their youth or exuberance, forget to do so.

It gets late and they all become drowsy. They set down their lamps and find a place to snooze.

Eventually, the cry goes out, "here comes the groom. Come out to meet him!"

Guests and family rush out of the house to greet the wedding party. The ten young women arise and fix their lamps: the loose wicks must be adjusted and oil reserves inside the lamps replenished.



Five of the women suddenly realize their mistake. Their lamps are almost out of olive oil and they have no reserves.

They cry out for oil to the five wise women, but they only have enough for their own lamps.

Since everyone knows everyone in a small village, the five unprepared women have little trouble borrowing some oil, but when they return the bride and groom, and everyone are in the house and they have shut the door.

In the final scene, the shortsighted five women return with their lamps and pound on the door, “sir, open the door!”

“sorry,” replies the groom, “I don’t think I know you.”

We are left hanging. We do not know the final ending because in the middle east “no” is never an answer, but rather a pause in the negotiations....

So, I’d like to throw four quick ideas related to the parable for you to chew on in the coming week:

Two are from Scott peck in his book the road less traveled:

Life is difficult. This is the wise starting point for us in life. Being patiently present and wisely waiting helps us stay grounded.

In order to succeed, one must be willing to delay gratification. As I mentioned earlier, learning how to wait is a spiritual discipline. Impulsive behaviors, wanting it now. Betting on the come don’t do us any good.

Third, life keeps coming at us. One-way deb has helped me is that she has always urged us to take care of things and work just a little harder at whatever is in front of us. I will want to quit, and she keeps us at it a little longer.

I think of the five foolish women who don’t take that extra bit of time to carry a supply of oil with them.



In order to succeed in life, Sigmund Freud stated that we must go from the horse riding us to us riding the horse.

The horse riding us has to do with everything that is outside our awareness. When we don't continue to learn, gain wisdom, become self-reflective, then we are going to be constantly unpleasantly surprised by life. We are going to be knocked every which way by the life that keeps coming at us.

The more we learn, grow in awareness, and patiently prepare, the more we are riding the horse.

Each of us has to finish the parable for ourselves. And in that, find where we might need to adjust our life.

SERMON SONG

Wait for Me (Hall and Oates)