

THE PEOPLE WHO WAIT

SHERARD EDINGTON

Matthew 25:1-13

How many of you like to wait? I would hazard to guess that not many of you do. I certainly don't like waiting. Waiting implies doing nothing—being forced into a moment of time in which you are at the mercy of the person you are waiting for—waiting for a friend, waiting for the cable guy, waiting for a meeting to begin. Waiting isn't always bad. There is waiting for something fun or exciting. One joyfully waits for the birth of a grandchild. We are coming into the season of waiting for Christmas. Kids in school wait for summer. There is also the anxious waiting of waiting for the test results to come back. We may not like to wait, but often we have no choice.

I have a friend named Mark who is a Civil War re-enactor. Mark has a horse so he rides in the cavalry. A couple of years ago, he was over at Shiloh in a re-enactment and there was an incident. Mark's horse got spooked and he got thrown into a tree. He was banged up pretty good so they hauled him to the hospital (a real hospital, not a re-enactment hospital). He is in the hallway of the emergency room lying on a gurney still in his Civil War uniform. A policeman walks by and looks at him. The policeman walks a bit farther, stops, turns around and comes back to Mark. He looks at him again and then asks, "How long have you been waiting?"

Our reading today is about waiting. It is one of Jesus' parables. Before I go any further, I want to take a moment and talk about the parables and stories that we find in scripture. Because it is scripture, we want to treat every story as historical fact. Yes, there is much in scripture that is fact, but a lot of it isn't. Jesus told stories to teach about things that can't be described directly. Think about being in love, whether it is love for a spouse, or a parent's love for a child, or any sort of love, how do you describe love? Not very well. It is largely indescribable. So we use other methods. We write poems, we compose music, we tell stories that illustrate the different aspects of what it is like to be in love.

Jesus did the same thing. Jesus told stories and parables to teach about God and grace and salvation and other aspects of faith, and, as we see in today's reading, about the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is too big to be contained in a single story so Jesus tells multiple stories approaching the kingdom from different angles. Our reading today employs the image of a wedding to describe the kingdom. And remember, this is just a story. There is no need to attempt to connect it with the wedding at Cana which Jesus attended. A wedding was an image that everyone could easily grasp.

To tell the people about the kingdom, Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.” In that culture, it was the bridesmaids who accompanied the groom to the wedding. They carried lamps so as to illuminate the handsome young man as they paraded though the town. Five of the bridesmaids are described as being foolish and five are described as being wise. The foolish ones, when they went, failed to take extra oil for their lamps. The wise bridesmaids, on the other hand, packed extra oil with them. Because the bridegroom was delayed, the ten bridesmaids grew drowsy and fell asleep.

Around midnight, the approaching bridegroom is announced with a shout that wakes the bridesmaids. They quickly trimmed their lamps so the wicks would burn more evenly. The foolish bridesmaids realized that their lamps were nearly out of oil so they turned to those who brought extra and said, “Give us some of your oil. Our lamps are going out.” The wise bridesmaids told them, “No. If we do that then there won’t be enough for us or you. You should do to the dealers and buy some more.” The foolish bridesmaids left to acquire more oil and while they were gone the bridegroom made his appearance. The wise went with him to the wedding banquet and the door was shut. Eventually, the five foolish bridesmaids arrived at the banquet. They knocked on the door asking to be let in, but the bridegroom told them, “Sorry, but I do not know you.” The story ends with the warning, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Although the warning to keep awake is there, the story is not really about keeping awake. All ten of the bridesmaids fell asleep. It was late; they were tired; the bridegroom was running behind schedule. This story is not about staying awake or falling asleep, it is about waiting. But more than that, it is about being prepared to wait. The five wise bridesmaids were wise because they anticipated the groom being delayed and they packed extra batteries for their flashlights. They would have made great boy scouts. They followed the motto, “Be Prepared.

This story is thirteen verses long. It should end at verse 10 where the bridegroom arrives and the wise bridesmaids follow him to the banquet. The lesson to be learned would be that the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding banquet. We don’t know exactly when we will be admitted so we should wait wisely and prepare for any contingencies. But the story does not end there. It continues on with a warning of judgment. The foolish bridesmaids say, “Lord, lord, open to us” and the groom responds, “I don’t know you.” The groom doesn’t say, “we are out of food,” or “the party is over,” he denies knowing them at all. They are shut out of the kingdom forever.

It has been two thousand years since Jesus died and we are still waiting—or we should be. How many have given up, have quit expecting anything to happen? It is difficult to wait and wait and wait. This has been a challenge for Christians since the very beginning. The earliest book of the New Testament is First Thessalonians.

In this letter Paul addresses a concern brewing within the congregation. Members of the church were dying and the rest were worried if their friends' souls were lost because they died before Jesus' return. Paul assures the people that those who died died in the Lord. They will just need to wait and be patient. The time of the Lord's return is a mystery. Paul writes, *the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night* (5:2).

Christians are people who wait. The question we have to ask ourselves is, How do we wait? Will we be foolish or wise? How will we prepare?

As we wait for the moment which harkens the very coming of Christ, we also find ourselves waiting for other moments which demand a response. We know these moments will arrive because of the frequency with which they have happened before. We only need wait for the next report of gun violence, or an incidence of racism or sexism, or hatred or intolerance or xenophobia. Response is difficult because there are structures and systems which resist change. What do we do? Do we complacently do nothing and accept collusion with these powers? Or, do we trim our lamps, shine light on the situation, and push back?

We are people who wait, and how we wait determines what happens when we knock at the door of the God's great banquet. Will we be recognized and welcomed or will we be turned away with the words, "Sorry, I don't know you. You are not one of mine."