Keeping Our Lamps for Party-Watching

Matthew 25:1-13

Today, I want to give some reflection on Keeping Our Lamps for Party-Watching. In other words: What do we do with the waiting? Waiting is so part of being human that this question is always being posed to us. It is something we're all accustomed to—we collectively wait for Christmas, for a loved one to return home safely from travels, for the phone call back from the doctor, for the tide to turn, as with our current political movement and the blue tsunami which has swept through our country this week.

Waiting is hard, even when something is assured to happen. But how much more when it isn't?! There can be anticipation and hope but there can also be a measure of anxiety mixed in. Often times, we wait as if we hold some power to will that thing to happen when more times than not we are powerless in that suspended time. This makes us not very patient people, doesn't it? Even the command, to "Be patient", seems to have an opposite effect. Has anyone ever told you, to "Be patient", and it worked?

How do you handle it when you are being asked to wait?—When you have to be somewhere and the traffic is backed up… Or you are stuck in a long line to receive that anticipated item, to access that anticipated area, or to just get through that dreaded process… to have to wait longer for the thing on backorder? What is your capacity for patience and gentleness with those around you when you're having to wait before getting the thing you want?

When I think of patience, I remember the warning I was given as a younger person to never ask God for it because inevitably there will arise situations in your life to give you plenty of chances for learning to be a patient person. It seems then, we all have some learning to do in that area.

Our Gospel text this morning is the parable of the Ten Virgins. It is situated within Matthew's larger theme of who is in and who is out of God's kingdom. A favorite theme for Matthew. But a curious, if not disturbing, text for how it proposes to portray the Christ. Here, we have ten bridesmaids—5 wise and 5 foolish—who are waiting to meet the bridegroom. Jewish tradition tells us that the newly married couple would come to the house of the groom's father where the wedding after-party would be held. The role of the bridesmaids was to be there to greet the bridegroom when he arrives.

In the parable, all ten bridesmaids are there with glowing lamps in hand, waiting for the bridegroom who does not arrive on time—even for Ancient Near Eastern time standards which basically understood that someone will show up when they show up. For the more punctual ones among us, this would have been particularly hard to cope with.

And in their long waiting vigil, all ten bridesmaids fall asleep. Then, at midnight —which is to say, in the deepest part of night, and at an hour when least expected—the bridegroom arrives and the bridesmaids stir awake and trim their lamps for his arrival.

Yet, only the ones called wise brought enough oil to keep their lamps lit and the five others had a moment of panic. Seeing that some brought extra oil, the ones called foolish ask if they could borrow some to refuel their lamps. But the wise ones were worried: "If we share some of ours, there will not be enough for you and for us. Go buy some for yourself." So, quickly they run to the nearest 24-hour bodega and purchase more oil. Only while they were out, the party starts and the door is closed. When they return, they are greeted by a host who is unwilling to let them in.

Now, this has always been a hard parable to swallow, even though it is one of my favorite New Testament texts. When I read this, there is a troubling lack of redeeming qualities with all the characters involved. Where do I find myself in all of this? Whenever I've heard this parable taught it's usually with the instruction to be like the *wise* ones who brought enough oil to keep their lamps lit. Yet, I struggle with their lack of generosity and what seems to be the impulse to hoard their resources, to consider themselves over the needs of their fellow bridesmaids. If they each brought extra oil, surely each can share just a little to light all the lamps of the 10.

In the teaching of Jesus given in Matthew 5: "If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." We serve a generous God who gives wastefully, even to those who are deemed unwise, or deemed by society to be worth-less. A God who leaves the 99 in order to pursue the one. Were it not for the Gospel writer's designation of these five being "wise", we would not see their actions as such, against the generous and extravagant spirit of a loving God.

Likewise, it's hard to know what makes the others so foolish. After all, it was the bridegroom who arrives far later than socially expected—*in the dead of night*—after they had been patiently waiting with the others, holding their lit lamps. And they *all* end up falling asleep. Yet, these five are quick to their feet and act immediately to replenish their oil supplies, in the middle of the dark night without a light, no less. They return to the house, re-stocked and willing to usher in the party, but they find the door shut. That probably felt just as decisive and condemning as the host's response after calling out: "Lord, lord, open to us." To get the reply: "Truly I tell you, I do not know you."

But we also call to mind Jesus' words in Matthew 7:

"Ask, and it will be given to you;
search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.
For everyone who asks receives,
and everyone who searches finds,
and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

We are hard-pressed to find our way through this parable, finding actions which run counter to what we learn and know about Jesus the Christ and God in other New Testament passages. And for me, perhaps that is a take-away here. At times in my life, I've been each of these characters, both foolish and wise. And you probably have been too. I've been the fully stocked oil carrier, ready with all the tools for the long night of faith. No matter how dark things may have gotten, or how long-suffering I had to be to endure the night, I brought enough oil for my lamp, to last well past midnight.

And I've also known in other seasons of life the impulse to hoard what was mine in the name of scarcity, unwilling to help others around me who just needed a bit of oil for their own lamps. I've sent them away in the dead of night, when I had enough to go around for the both of us.

I've also been the ones Matthew calls foolish, for running off too quickly instead of waiting to endure the dark, trusting that there is enough light from the other lamps around me, trusting that *all* the bridegroom wants is for me to be present when he arrives, even if I lack some of the fiery resources of my faith. I see myself reflected here in many ways.

I want to bring this back to waiting. The necessity to keep ones lamp trimmed and burning, as the old Gospel song reminds us, seems to be separate from gaining access to the party. Five bridesmaids scurry off, thinking that having enough oil was the whole point, and they miss the party. The host says to them: "I do not know you." They weren't kept out because they didn't have oil enough to welcome the bridegroom with lamps lit; They missed out on the party because they didn't stay around in the dark where they would have been met and known by the Bridegroom. There something about remaining, lamp lit or otherwise, so to not miss being with the Bridegroom. There's something in the waiting.

In a couple of weeks, we'll be visiting this theme of "keeping awake" as we move into the Advent season. Bernard of Clairvaux, the twelfth-century abbot and theologian, wrote of "three Advents". I like to think of these like the three ghostly visitations in the story of Scrooge.

In the first, the Incarnation of Christ, it is an Advent of the past. That is, Christmas Day, and the arrival of Jesus as the light of the world. Christ comes to us bringing hope and as God's presence among us. The last Advent is the end of the age, the Parousia, the culmination of history, the ghost of what is to come, if you will. But the middle Advent, the one in between the past and future Advents, Bernard of Clairvaux writes, is the Advent of the present, the *everyday* arrival of Jesus: the one who knocks at our door, who comes as a still small voice, as the weary refugee, the asylum seeker, the migrant, the mother who is hungry, the prisoner, the grumpy neighbor, the needy friend, the least among us. Isn't it then, that the life of faith is being awake and ready to greet *this* Christ again… and again… and again?

There will be seasons when we will do this with fully lit lamps, when we will resist the temptation to sleep, even, when the night of waiting is long and exhausting. Then other seasons of life, we are still asked to wait for Christ's arrival, without a lamp to see it clearly, but to resist scurrying away, to remain, to watch in patience, to not miss greeting that presence.

We are used to treating waiting as "dead time" that has to be endured until something is rewarded. In the Christian journey, waiting is often talked about as a "testing ground" we undergo so that we might receive the "blessing" that lies on the other side. But Scripture reminds us that the waiting room IS the sanctuary. That IS when we encounter the Bridegroom, so that when the party begins, we are known and welcomed in. There is an essential piece of this parable that we cannot miss.

I so like the way that Robert Capon writes it in his book *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, that I want to close with his words. He writes:

"Watch therefore," Jesus says at the end of the parable, "for you know neither the day nor the hour." When all is said and done—when we have scared ourselves silly with the now-or-never urgency of faith and the once-and-always finality of judgment—we need to take a deep breath and let it out with a laugh. Because what we are watching for is a party. And that party is not just down the street making up its mind when to come to us. It is already hiding in our basement, banging on our steam pipes, and laughing its way up our cellar stairs. The unknown day and hour of its finally bursting into the kitchen and roistering its way through the whole house is not dreadful; it is all part of the divine lark of grace. God is not our mother-in-law, coming to see whether her wedding-present china has been chipped. He is a funny Old Uncle with a salami under one arm and a bottle of wine under the other. We do indeed need to watch for him; but only because it would be such a pity to miss all the fun."

Children don't grow weary
Children don't grow weary
Children don't grow weary
For the time is drawing nigh.

Amen.