

Come Sunday: A Narrative Lectionary-Based Bible Study

March 15, 2015- Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year One)

Matthew 25:1-13

"Later the other bridesmaids came and said, 'Lord, lord, open the door for us.'

"But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'

-Matthew 25:11-12

Introduction

When I was a kid growing up in 1970s Michigan, the longest wait was between Thanksgiving and Christmas. It seemed like I would never, ever be able to open my presents on Christmas morning.

One particular Christmas morning, I really, really couldn't wait. I woke my parents up asking if we could open presents. My parents balked and with good reason- it was 4:30 in the morning! My parents told me to go back to bed, which I did but I didn't really sleep.

A few hours later, I went to ask my parents again if we could open up presents. It was now 6:30 in the morning. My parents still weren't keen on getting up at that time in the day (something I understand now that I am an adult). However, my grandmother, who was living with us at the time, was an early riser. Mom suggested asking mi Abuela, my grandmother if she would open presents with me. My grandmother was willing and able and I can remember the joy of finally opening my presents.

Waiting is hard; there is really no other way around it. While we tend to think that us modern folk are really bad at waiting, the people of Jesus day weren't that much better, especially when something big was going to happen.

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In the years following Jesus death and resurrection, the infant church was told to wait for Christ's return. The early Christ-followers had hoped Jesus would return soon and it became difficult as the years and decades went by. Of course, we still wait for Christ's second coming, and it is as hard as it was for those first Christians? What does it mean to wait now? What are we to do while we wait?

Today we read a parable on the Ten Bridesmaids. Five bridesmaids were prepared for the coming of the groom, five were not. This is a parable about being ready, but it is also a hard tale. Five women were locked out of the wedding. Five other women didn't share their oil with the others. What does this parable mean? Does it mean that some will be excluded?

The Setting

This parable is the second in a series of parables in Matthew that talks about the return of Jesus. The others are the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants (Matthew 24:45-50), Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25: 14-30), and the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25: 31-46).

Matthew tends to focus more on the concept of judgment than the other gospels. However, there is a caveat: no one can discern who is blessed and who is cursed. Other parables highlight this: the wheat grows with the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30); the wedding guest didn't know he had to wear a wedding garment (Matthew 22:11-14) and the sheep and goats are surprised by their fates (Matthew 25:31-46). In this parable the foolish virgins did not bring extra oil, but the bridegroom is delayed.

In addition, the parable un-nerves people because they are self-aware that they are sometimes not prepared.

Jesus is Coming...Any Minute Now...

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten young bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the groom. ²Now five of them were wise, and the other five were foolish. ³The foolish ones took their lamps but didn't bring oil for them. ⁴But the wise ones took their lamps and also brought containers of oil.

-Matthew 25:1-4

It's Greek to Me

μωροι ("mooria" meaning "fool"; 25:2)

Mooria is where we get the English word "moron."

γρηγορευετε (from γρηγορε, like the name gregory!, meaning "watch out"; 25:13)

This is an ongoing waiting.

Matthew is writing to a young church that has faced many trials such as the destruction of Jerusalem. The passage is an exhortation to keep the faith and wait expectantly to the return of Jesus even if it is delayed.

But waiting is hard. As I shared in the Introduction, it is difficult for a child to wait for Christmas morning. What makes waiting so hard is the anxiety that's baked into the wait. What if Jesus doesn't come? What if I die before Jesus comes? Can I trust God?

It's important to note that Jesus is also waiting. Jesus has entered Jerusalem and is waiting for his upcoming arrest, trial and death. Jesus keeps doing what he has been doing: telling stories, confronting authorities and teaching his disciples all the while knowing his death is coming. So, as we wait, it is important to remember that Jesus also had to wait.

So, what do we do while we wait? Maybe it means engaging in "active" waiting. When help the poor and defenseless we are reminded of Christ's return and tell others as well. Justice is also a part of waiting.

Finally, we don't wait alone. Daily frustrations and distractions can drag us down. But that is where the local church comes in- as a place where we find others who are waiting and support each other in daily waiting- the Christian life.

Who is Who?

¹¹ Now when the king came in and saw the guests, he spotted a man who wasn't wearing wedding clothes. ¹² He said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' But he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to his servants, 'Tie his hands and feet and throw him out into the farthest darkness. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.'
-Matthew 22:11-13

This parable is an allegory- a story composed of several symbols. The bridesmaids are the church is waiting for the Second Coming of Jesus. The groom is Jesus. The delay of the groom is a symbol of the delay of the Second Coming that the young church was experiencing. The arrival of the groom is the second coming and the locked door is the final judgment.

It seems a bit odd for God to enforce a dress code. Where would this person find wedding duds? Somehow everyone else is able to find wedding clothes.

One possible interpretation is that the wedding clothes are a reference to sanctification, the process of being made worthy by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Questions

1. What do you like to do when you are waiting for something or someone?
2. Who do you identify with more- the wise or foolish virgins?
3. Were the wise virgins selfish for not sharing with the foolish virgins?
4. What do you think of the concept of judgment? How does it fit in our faith?

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