

November 6, 2011
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 5: 18–24
Matthew 25: 1–13

“The Tardy Bridegroom”

In many ways, time is coming to a head. Things are about to happen in this world and in our lives ... things of God’s doing, things that go beyond even that which God has already revealed to us through our faith in Christ. For the most part, I believe we take time for granted, except when a birthday rolls around, or a significant anniversary. Then we may take pause, and reflect upon the fact that, indeed, we are ever steadily moving into the future, and for those who know and trust God, we are moving ever more assuredly into God’s future, whatever that will be like for us. I like the way St. Paul said this when he wrote to the Christians in Rome:

“...you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we (first) became believers.”

(Romans 13:11)

Another way time is pressing in upon us, in addition to the rapidly passing days of our lives, is in the life cycle of the church. The calendar of the church year reminds us of this. Two Sundays from today will be Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday, and the beginning of the last week of this church year. Advent marks the beginning of yet a new year in the church, and the cycle of the year begins all over again. But our lives are not cyclic, and that is the point about which both our lessons are warning us this morning. From the day we are born, until the day we pass away, our lives are a steady progression toward the future God has planned for us. Though the coming of the Bridegroom is delayed, for whatever reason, each day that passes is another day in the steady progression of creation toward the Day of Christ the King, the beginning of the Wedding Banquet. We do not know when that will be, and Jesus charges us to “keep awake;” don’t be caught “sleeping.”

Whenever I conduct a wedding, I am a stickler for being certain that there is a wedding rehearsal, that everyone knows what they are to do and when they are to do it. For me, starting the service at exactly the designated time is also very important. There typically is so much time, money and planning that goes into preparing for a wedding these days, that the event becomes a very emotionally laden experience for nearly everyone involved. When it comes to wedding

services, I don't like surprises. I like to know what to expect, and I think family members do as well. Planning and rehearsing a wedding enhances the worshipfulness and meaningfulness of the service for everyone.

I attended a wedding one time as a friend of the bridegroom. Thirty minutes before the wedding the bride had not arrived at the church where she was to dress. Twenty minutes before the service was to begin, a car that could have flown if it had wings zoomed up to the church. The bride was seen dashing into the church dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, with her hair up in rollers. The church was beginning to fill up, and conversation was spreading like wildfire through the congregation about what all might be going on. There were even some bets being laid down. I felt anxious. Finally the church was filled to capacity. The hour came and passed. No mothers had been seated. People were beginning twist and turn for any glimpse of what might be going on. At ten past the hour, the pastor went into the pulpit and announced the delay with no explanation, leaving all of us to wonder what in the world was going on. How long would it be? This is a true story. The service started forty-five minutes late. The bridegroom and his family seemed to handle it all very well. The Bride and her mother seemed quite a bit worse for the wear. But we are all just so grateful the bride showed up...I think. And as an update for this couple and their children, so far ... so good...I think.

Matthew tells us the story (a parable) about a wedding in which there is also a delay. Jesus tells us that the parable is in some way descriptive of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is clear that for some reason there is a delay in the actual wedding, a wedding that will take place at the wedding banquet. Because of the delay, the bridesmaids, who will join the wedding procession to the banquet, are kept waiting. I would think this might have stirred up some anxiety in the earliest disciples.

The wedding Matthew describes has some glitches in it, not the least of which is that there is no bride, so we are not going to learn much from this story about the details of a first century Jewish wedding. Beyond this, we should remind ourselves that in many, many ways Jews living in the first century were very different from us today. For instance, they didn't have wrist watches or cell phones, and since wedding celebrations went on for seven days, I would guess that starting the ceremony right on the hour simply was not a priority. It's

no wonder the bride's father ran out of wine at the wedding banquet in Cana of Galilee.

This parable of the ten bridesmaids is intended to be interpreted allegorically as an explanation as to why the coming of the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven ... the day of the coming of Christ the King at the end of history has been delayed. Everything in the parable is a symbol for something, and some of the symbols are easy to discern: 1) The wedding banquet is symbolic of the Kingdom of Heaven; 2) The Tardy Bridegroom is the Messiah, Christ our Lord, who, for some reason, is delayed in getting to the banquet; 3) The bridesmaids are those who await his arrival with eager anticipation. They have their lamps, should he arrive in the darkness of night, and are very excited to be members of the wedding party. Typically, the bridegroom would go to the bride's home, get her and escort her to the wedding banquet. The bridesmaids would join them in the procession to the wedding and the banquet.

All of this is fine, but when seeking to understand what Jesus is telling us about the Kingdom of Heaven, what do you suppose the oil is intended to represent. Some commentators have suggested that the oil represents "good works." (Long, Thomas G. Matthew. The Westminster Bible Companion. pg. 280). If this were so, then our thoughts might turn to those Christians who are apparently all fired up about Jesus, but have run low on oil, ...that is, those who, over the long haul, have grown weary with, or perhaps bored with doing good works through the long "night" of waiting for the Kingdom. What if the Bridegroom never shows? Have I committed my life to beliefs that have been a charade all along? (Long, Thomas G. Matthew. The Westminster Bible Companion. pg. 280). In these days of the 21st century, we might not be able to keep from thinking of those who say they believe in God, refer to themselves as Christians, certainly good people, but just don't see the urgency in attending church and show no evidence of committing themselves to her life and ministries. A forty-five minute delay in the start of a banquet is nothing compared to a twenty-one hundred year delay. As a side note, some students came to this understanding of the lamp oil representing "good works" by something Jesus said earlier in the Sermon on the Mount. There, he called on his followers to "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works." (Matthew 5:16). Without the "oil" of good works, no light can shine.

I believe, however, that this interpretation of the parable in terms of doing good works could put us on the thin ice of judging others: their works, their commitment, their faithfulness. We simply may not need to go there, especially if we are willing to read and take to heart the message of the Prophet Amos. Amos has quite adequately pointed the finger of judgment for us. Amos has shown us what God expects of us with regard to our relationships with God and with others. We are to do what is right. We are to be honest and truthful in all our dealings with others. We are to be compassionate and thoughtful, sharing what we have with others. We can just hold that text up as if looking in a mirror and read: In our lives and in our actions, we are to:

"Let Justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."
(Amos 5:24)

Then we can ask the question: "How are we doing with this?"

So, let's consider the wedding banquet and the Tardy Bridegroom from another angle. The wise bridesmaids, those with the extra flasks of oil, are described as "those who were ready when the bridegroom came." (Matthew 25:10) But, ready for what? The bridegroom? No, the foolish bridesmaids were eager for the groom to arrive as well. The wise bridesmaids are distinctive not because they were ready for the groom, but because they were ready for the groom's delay. To bring along an extra flask of oil is a signal that they were prepared for the bridegroom to come early or late. If the groom had arrived on time, if he had come when he was predicted to arrive, then all the bridesmaids --- foolish as well as wise --- would have greeted him with great joy and gratefully entered into the banquet hall together. But the bridegroom, like the Kingdom of Heaven, did not arrive promptly; he was delayed, and some twenty-one hundred years later, the Kingdom is still delayed. (Long, Thomas G. Matthew. The Westminster Bible Companion. pg. 281). Listen to Tom Long's eloquent comment on this parable:

"The wise ones in the church are those who are prepared for the delay; who hold on to the faith deep into the night; who, even though they see no bridegroom coming, still serve and hope and pray and wait for the promised victory of God, (the victory we will remember and celebrate when we come to this table). Many will finally despair and turn away in discouragement, saying, "The bridegroom has left us standing at the altar, the banquet is off, there is no kingdom, life is just

one cursed thing after another with no goal or end." But then in the middle of history's long night, when the world least expects it, a cry will go up:

"Look!

Here is the bridegroom!

Here, at last the long-expected Jesus.

Trim your lamps. Come out, one and all to meet him."

(Long, Thomas G. Matthew. The Westminster Bible Companion. pg. 281)

My friends, time is of the essence. History is coming to a head. Something big is about to happen. Even though the Bridegroom is delayed, his promise to return is as sure as is our presence here together in this sanctuary this morning. And though we do not see him now, as there is a delay, that does not mean he is not present with us in this moment, in this banquet prepared for us. He calls us to remember him, all he has taught us, all he has done for us. The Bridegroom will indeed come in the darkness of the night. The night is already here. Keep your lamps at the ready. Get that extra flask of oil. Bring them with you, and come to this table, this Lord's Banquet for us today. Together, we will remember, we will give thanks, we will renew our hope for the future, and that moment when the Bridegroom appears.