

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
 God's not working on our schedule. (So what do we do in the meantime?)
 Scripture: Matthew 25:1-13
 Rev. Steve Filyk
 Opening Hymn: Rejoice, the Lord is King [267]
 Choruses: Here I am to worship AND Give me oil in my lamp [655]
 Closing Hymn: Lord of light, whose name and splendour [769]

Imagine that you've invited a friend over for coffee.
 You are certain they are coming,
 You've connected earlier in the morning.

But you also know that they are likely running late.
 So what do you do while you are waiting?

Look out the window?
 Watch the clock?

There are much more valuable ways to pass the time...

Here's some suggestions I found online:

Read a little.
 Floss and brush your teeth.
 Put the dishes away (or into the dishwasher).
 Clean out a junk drawer.
 Throw out old paperwork.
 Give some attention to a pet.ⁱ

Most of us have learned to make good use of our time
 When we are spending a few minutes waiting.

But what do you do when the waiting is longer-term?

When you are looking for a home
 in a market with no housing?
 When you are over 40
 and have yet to find your true vocation or true love?

When you've been longing for a victory
 But God has failed to show up in this area of your life?
 When your health is failing
 and you feel that your most important work is done?

What do you do when the waiting is longer-term?

Today we are continuing our journey
 Through the Gospel of Matthew.

In Chapter 24 as Jesus leaves Jerusalem Temple with his disciples
 He foretells its destruction:

"not one stone here will be left on another;
 Everyone one will be thrown down."ⁱⁱ

This would be something akin to
 Someone telling us that Parliament Hill

Is going to be destroyed...
 Cataclysmic to our imaginations.

Not surprisingly, this comment leads
 to the disciples questioning Jesus
 About the end of all things.

[You may recall that many in the Jewish faith
 Expected history to be wrapped up
 With a resurrection of the dead,
 And the renewal of all things,
 Imagined as a wedding feast.]

Jesus answered these questions
 With a description of trials and tribulations.

And then he told them a series of three parables about vigilance.

The first is about a property manager who holds
 A wild party in an owner's absence
 Only to be confronted with the owner
 Who arrives earlier than expected.

The second parable is today's parable,
 About a groom who doesn't arrive early,
 But late.

This story strikes most of us as strange.

As we practise weddings in our culture,
 the groom and groomsmen are those ones
 who traditionally show up early.

The groom is in place at the beginning of the ceremony.

The bride and her bridesmaids come to the location separately.
 And because of all the preparations and traditions
 Involving the bride and her entourage,
 they are the ones that sometime show up late.

But that's not how it was in Jesus' day.

In Jesus' day,
 The bride and bridesmaids would wait at her home
 to be picked up by the groom.

Then they would process to the wedding location together.

"Because the exact timing was unpredictable,
 Given the many preparations
 (and the bride's relatives haggling over the value of the gifts given them) [not to mention no wristwatches

The bridesmaids needed to stay ready...
 [especially since they were]
 young women [who were also] hoping
 to find husbands for themselves."ⁱⁱⁱ

But as Jesus tells the story
 This groom was delayed more than usual.
 All the bridesmaids have fallen asleep while waiting.

When the bridegroom finally arrives, they awaken
 And prepare to join the evening procession.

But not all are ready.
 Their lamps have gone out in the delay,
 And while some of them
 have packed more oil,
 Others haven't.

And it's hard to join a midnight procession
 without a torch.

While the ones without oil [the foolish bridesmaids]
 beg to borrow oil from the wise and prepared bridesmaids
 There isn't enough to go around,
 And they are told to go to the market and buy more.

In their own delay they miss the procession.
 They arrive at the wedding location to locked doors.
 When they call out to be let in,
 They are told to go away.

As we were reminded last week,
 Parables aren't straightforward tales.

"In terms of image and subject matter... [they] are realistic,
 but in the unfolding of the parable
 the realism is shattered...

A prime key to the meaning of a parable arises
 when the realism of the parable begins to break down."^{iv}

So where does the realism break down in this parable?

The setting is realistic,
 and the delay is imaginable,
 As is the fact that some of the bridesmaids aren't prepared.

What seems strange however,
 is that those foolish, unprepared bridesmaids
 Are sent off to the market.

I mean there were no 7-11s
Or 24-hour convenience stores in Jesus' time.

What also seems unreasonably harsh and strange
is that when they finally arrived at the wedding location,
they are sent away as strangers.

So how are we to make sense of this parable?
What key do these twists provide?

It is helpful to start exploring the symbolism,
in the parable
To unlock the mystery that remains.

Last week's exploration of the wedding banquet
Provides us with an easy in...

"The virgins represent Christians
who await the bridegroom, Jesus the Messiah.

The bridegroom's delay alludes to the fact
that Jesus has not returned
as soon as many had hoped.

The marriage feast symbolizes life of the age to come.
The closed door stands as the last judgement."^v

But how are we to understand those elements
Where the parable falls apart?
What are we to make of the missing oil?
Why are the bridesmaids shut out?

It is important to realise that the oil
Is the source of light for the bridesmaids torches,
and that light itself is a strong theme in Matthew.

Earlier in Matthew 5:14-16 "Jesus exhorts his disciples,

"Let your light shine before men and women
that they may see your good works
and give glory to your father in heaven".

Matthew [also] says that "the righteous will shine like the sun
in the kingdom of their Father" (13:43)."^{vi}

Oil is a symbol for good deeds and character.
Which goes some way in explaining why it can't be shared.

It can't be shared in the same way
That the virtue or good works of one person
Can't be shared with another.

It is our own individual responsibility before God.

As for being turned away at the wedding,
 Jesus' language closely resembles that which is used
 At the closing of his Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus similarly rejects the false disciples
 Who cry out to him 'Lord, Lord'
 As those he doesn't know.

Instead of speaking about wise and foolish bridesmaids
 He concludes by talking about wise and foolish builders,
 And notes that the wise ones are those who
 'listen to his words AND put them into practise.'^{vii}

So what in the end is Jesus trying to teach his disciples,
 And trying to tell us?

Jesus wants us to know that the End of the Ages is coming,
 And that our welcome then
 depends on our actions now.

That it matters what we are doing in the interim.

If this doesn't sound to you like
 Being saved by grace along, through faith alone
 Then maybe you need to hear these words from
 The Danish theologian/philosopher Soren Kierkegaard:

"The mystery of grace consists in the fact
 that the most strenuous human effort is still fool's play,
 a wasted inconvenience, a ridiculous gesture,
 if it should be an attempt to earn salvation—

and still to push on
 [and still to push on]
 just like one who soberly and seriously believes
 that by his efforts he could earn salvation."^{viii}

So are you earnestly striving to grow in good works?

Another commentator notes how:
 we often presume that
 we have all the time in the world
 to tend certain matters:

rebuilding a broken relationship, learning a skill,
 offering a needed word of gratitude or forgiveness,
 replacing a bad habit with a good one,
 achieving an important goal, changing careers,
 deepening our relationship with God, contributing to society,

spending time with a child,
faithfully following Christ.

We put off for today that which can presumably be done tomorrow.
[but] in this parable, there is a note of finality...

Now is the time for active discipleship...

The kingdom of heaven summons us to new life,
improved commitment, casting away of false idols,
active waiting in hope, and renewed vigor in faith...

faithful action done now
prepares us to weather the unexpected timing of God,
even as it prepares us for a heavenly wedding celebration,

when Jesus and his people,
the bridegroom and his beloved bride,
are joyfully joined together in celebration forever."^{ix}

I realise that after 2000 years of waiting
any preaching about the Christ's return--
literal, personal, visible--
will fall on mostly deaf ears.

And yet many will concede
That there is a possibility
That our return TO Christ could be sooner than we imagine.

Emma Kiss was ready to go home to see the Lord.
But few people imagined that two days after catching a fever
She would so quickly be gone to see him.

I can only imagine that those two constables in Edmonton
That were tragically and unexpectedly killed this past week,
Had all sorts of plans for this summer.

How about you. Do you have plans for this summer?
Moving to a new home,
Taking a vacation,
Soaking up the sun?

Do your plans include growing in your discipleship and obedience?

May we all be ready for the future God has prepared.
May we not miss the moments God gives us
To reorient our living according to God's will. Amen.

^{ix} "Things You Can Do While You're Waiting," Psychology Today, 18 Mar. 2022, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/emotional-brain/2022/03/things-you-can-do-while-youre-waiting.
[accessed 2022-03-18]

^x "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xi} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xii} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xiii} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xiv} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xv} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xvi} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xvii} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xviii} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xix} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

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^{xxiv} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xxv} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xxvi} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xxvii} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xxviii} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xxix} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.

^{xxx} "The Gospel of Matthew," 1880.