

Be Ready

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Matthew 25:1-13

I.

It is what church folk call “Stewardship season”. Next week we invite all of you to bring forward financial pledges—and also to be intentional about how you want to support the church with your time and energy.

You may wonder what a strange tale about ten virgins in Matthew’s gospel has to do with that. Well, ok. We’ll get there. But it’s going to take a moment to come around to it. Hear another story first.

II.

I suppose it was natural, when the couple took so long, that some would get tired of waiting. The wedding service over, the bride and groom had jumped into the limo, followed by the photographer, to take some “couple pictures” in a nearby grape arbor. They said the limo, with bride and groom, would come back by the church in half an hour, to pick up the wedding party. Now an hour was past. Everyone was a little impatient.

The fresh faced young pastor, having finished his second wedding ever, watched as one by one the ushers and bridesmaids drifted out the door. One had run out of cigarettes, and so two of them had gone down to the corner store to get some. Another decided he was hungry and meandered off to the local Dunkin Donuts. The pastor himself was getting a little cranky, anxious to lock up and go home.

It was now a full hour and a quarter, and half of them had left. The world’s longest stretch limo pulled up. A boisterous bride and groom emerged, apologizing loudly for the delay. Then they noticed the size of the remnant of the wedding party. They were down to a mere five! The bride blew up. “Where’s

Liz, and George, Shawn, Julie and Fred?” The pastor grimaced as he listened to one of the ushers whine. “Well. Liz ran out of smokes, and George, you know George, he got hungry and...like that. Who knows where the others went! Fred said something about Starbucks.”

At this point the limo driver chimed in. She was a tough looking woman in a chauffeur’s cap, who looked like she’d seen everything. You could tell she’d had enough of this crowd. “I’m afraid we’re late already, people. I have another job in twenty minutes. If you want a ride, let’s go.” The nervous groom started making some half-hearted protests, to no avail. He was no match for a pro.

It became clear, much to the pastor’s relief, that this wedding was going to move to the reception phase! Grumbling and laughing they got into the limo, someone saying “I guess they’ll find a way to get there themselves!”

The limo peeled out a little too fast, blue smoke belching from its twin chrome plated exhaust pipes. The young pastor started to laugh in spite of himself, wondering about Liz and George, Shawn, Julie and Fred. Wondering but not curious enough to stick around and find out...young he might be and inexperienced. But he knew the opportunity for a rapid escape when he saw it. Quickly he locked the doors. As he started up his beat-up little car, out of the corner of his eye he could see George emerging around one corner, donut bag in hand, while Liz and Julie strolled down the other end of the street, in their bright blue dresses. It had been one of those days, one of those weddings.

III.

When we first hear the “tale of the wise and foolish virgins” it’s easy to feel sorry for the ones who came without enough lamp oil, and left their posts to buy some more. But think about REAL weddings. This is the tale of the missing ushers. I confess to having officiated at too many weddings to have much sympathy for the people who take off on silly errands that hold everyone else hostage. Don’t bother to feel sorry for them! It was their own fault they missed a good party.

Weddings may change but some of the basic principles don’t, even over two thousand years. The unwritten rules for weddings haven’t changed that much since Jesus’ day. It goes like this. Everyone else waits patiently for the groom and the bride. Rule one: They are always late. They’re supposed to be! But, rule two, the

bridesmaids and ushers better be there on time! Nobody will hold a wedding up for a few missing attendants!

Jesus understood that his listeners were getting weary and distracted waiting for the reign of God to arrive in all its glory. But surely it wasn't all about waiting for the second coming. For things to come to fruition in our lives, in our world, with God, requires being ready. We need to be ready—whenever the wedding party arrives in our lives, whenever Christ's call to enter the path of discipleship sounds in our neighborhood, we need to be ready. "Give me oil in my lamp," goes the old camp song, "keep me burning."

We who are followers of Christ believe that a better world is possible. And we want to see the results. When the party doesn't start, when being faithful doesn't pay off quick, we find we need some extra oil for our lamps! Faith means feeling, praying, reflecting on the wait. It means going deep, doing what it takes, to be ready. It means recognizing that when it comes to preparing the party, we each have a part to play.

IV.

German poet Dorothee Soelle referred to this active style of waiting as "revolutionary patience." Revolutionary patience isn't the same thing as being passive or indifferent. It means locating what it takes to be prepared through the long night until the bridal party comes. It means being ready to be faithful witnesses to the light, whenever the need comes, whatever the moment, whether it be for a glorious banquet or holding out through the midnight of humanity's cruelest hours.

Life is full of waiting, full of the need for revolutionary patience, for doing what it takes to be ready. The moment we are being prepared for may come in a moment of great joy; or it may come in a lion's den! It may come in a courtroom. It may come in a hospital room, or it may come on a troubled city street, in the moment when two strangers become neighbors instead of enemies. It may come when we are young, or when we are old. It may come again and again, or it may come but once, in the course of a long life. But come how it may, the lesson is clear... Christ will come to us, often disguised as a refugee or stranger, a prisoner or hungry human. To RECEIVE Christ, to be ready for the banquet, means being prepared. It means being patient. It means getting focussed, it means staying steady. It means being ready to go, when the time is at hand. It means getting together the necessary resources to stay the course. And that, friends, is

stewardship of the deepest kind—material and spiritual, financial and practical, physical and prayerful. It's deeply personal. And it invites us all to come together.

V.

This past week, Rev. Kathy Donley reminded me of a true story from France, during the time of the Vichy government—during the second World War, when Jews were being rounded up in France and across Europe for concentration camps and gas chambers. The ordinary people in one area in France, centering on the village of Le Chambon, hid large numbers of Jews, especially children. This story means a lot to me, because my own mother and her family, wanted by the SS, were hidden by the Dutch Underground in Rotterdam, in the final year of the war.

The detail from the story of Le Chambon that caught my attention this time was of an older woman who was hiding a Jewish family under a chicken coop. To distract the soldiers when they came looking, she faked a heart attack. When asked later about where she found nerve and presence of mind to do this, she mentioned a sermon she had heard from Pastor Andre Trocme, in the local protestant church. "Pastor always told us, 'One day Jesus will come into your life and ask you to do something just for him.' On the Sunday that the Nazis came to our town, in his sermon, the pastor repeated those words, 'One day Jesus will come into your life and ask you to do something just for him.' Well, everybody in the congregation quietly nodded their heads. We all knew what we had to do. We were prepared for it."*

You and I do not live in Vichy France, we live in a challenging time and gather in a challenging place of our own: Schenectady New York, in 2017. We too are however part of a congregation of Jesus' followers. And we are likewise dedicated to doing what must be done what Christ calls us to, when it comes to hospitality, when it comes to offering shelter to the sojourner, when it comes to speaking a word for what is fair and true. These times too, call for generosity and they call for courage. You and I are people, I believe, who understand revolutionary patience. We already know what it means to be ready.

VI.

We are not alone. For while we wait for the bridal party, it turns out that we have each other, and God has given us the "oil" we need, the material and spiritual resources we need. We just need to find the courage to share them.

In this season of the year, we ask for each of us to reflect personally on our financial and personal commitments to the life of our church and our mission and ministry in this community and beyond. No matter how little or much we may have, God has given each of us enough—enough lamp oil if you will—to share. Unlike those five not so lovely bridesmaids that sent their sisters off looking for oil, we as a community have what it takes to support each other, to be there together.

We are not alone. For what we cannot come up with, God will help us with, to make us ready. And yet, friends, we need to ask God for the help, we need to be honest in our failings and earnest in our growing. Because the path we have chosen, this path of following Jesus: it has some challenges ahead. And as a gathered community looking to hold up Christ-light in the world, we need to be ready. Dig deep, and find that extra flask of fuel.

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*As quoted by Michael A. Turner in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 36, October-December 2008, p. 26. Thanks to Kathy Donley for the reminder and connection.