

“Waiting for the Groom”

Mathew 25:1-13

Rev. Curtis Bablitz

November 12th, 2023

Weddings are strange things – they’re full of weird little traditions and cultural quirks that people have been doing for so long no-one really understands why, and unless you grew up in that culture you’ll have a really hard time figuring out what’s going on. Back in Jesus’ day, there was no formal wedding ceremony; when the time came for the marriage to take place, the groom would set out from his home in a procession with all his friends, walking together to the bride’s home, and people would join in the procession as they passed through the villages and countryside. When they arrived, the bride would leave her parents’ house, and together with her new husband, they would all walk back to the husband’s home, again, gathering more onlookers and well-wishers into the parade as they made their way home.

Finally, when the couple reached their new home, the entire procession would come inside, and there would be a massive party, a feast open to all the people who had joined them along the parade route from house to house and back again. A Wedding was a big deal because everyone was welcome, it was an opportunity for the entire community, and sometimes several communities, to get together and celebrate, eat, drink and be merry, and that party could last for days, as long as the food and wine lasted, celebrating the new couple and the new relationship they had formed. So if you knew there was a wedding coming – if you knew that someone in your town was engaged to be married, that they

were making preparations to go meet their bride and bring them back to their home for a feast, you knew that you had to be waiting and watching, ready to join in that parade when the bridegroom passed by, ready to go and join the great celebration that was about to take place.

And so Jesus tells a parable about ten women – some translations call them bridesmaids, while the actual word Jesus uses literally means virgins, but the important thing isn't whether they're bridesmaids or virgins exactly. The important thing is that there's a wedding happening somewhere in town, and these women want to be part of the fun. These ladies are single and ready to mingle - a wedding would've been one of the highlights of their year, a chance to socialize and celebrate, and so when they hear that the bridegroom has left home to go and pick up his new bride and bring her home for the wedding, they drop everything and go out to the road where he is expected to pass by, and there they wait.

They have no idea how long he's going to be – his wife-to-be might live just down the road, or she might live in the next town over, or she might live on the other side of the country. The bridegroom might come back in ten minutes, or ten days – no way of knowing. But if these women want to join in the party, it is essential that they meet the bridegroom when he eventually shows up – joining the parade as it passes by is your ticket to the wedding feast, and it's not an opportunity that you should miss. It's kind of like those very eager people who line up when a new iPhone or a new video game system gets released, or when Taylor Swift tickets go on sale – if you want to join in the fun, you've got to get your spot and wait. So that's what these ten women do – they go out and wait by

the side of the road, settling in to wait for as long as it takes so that they will be there when the bridegroom returns, so they won't miss out on the party.

And they all have lamps. All ten of these women have lamps. And we honestly don't exactly know why. It's possible that the lamps had something to do with the wedding – maybe there was some tradition where women had to carry lamps in the procession, the way bridesmaids today carry bouquets of flowers – but if that's true, we've found no evidence of that tradition anywhere else in the scriptures or in other records of wedding customs in Jesus' time.

It's more likely that they had lamps for the same reason anyone has a lamp: they were waiting outside for an undetermined period of time, and it was likely to get dark at some point, so a lamp was a prudent thing to have with you, to make sure you could see your surroundings and not get yourself in any trouble, sitting in the dark by the side of a public road in the middle of the night. A lamp is a good thing to have while you're waiting, so that you don't have to wait in the dark.

And so they sat there, these ten women, they sat by the side of the road, and they waited. And they waited. And they waited. Maybe one of them brought a cribbage board and a deck of cards, maybe someone had brought some baking, some snacks to pass around, maybe a bottle of wine to get the party started a little early. Maybe somebody brought a good book they'd always been meaning to read, or maybe they just talked, shared old stories about the bridegroom from back when he was a kid with them in Synagogue School, the time he got in trouble with the rabbi for letting a snake loose during prayers, and so on and so on, as the day gets longer and the sun gets lower, and as darkness falls they all light their lamps, and they wait, and they chat, and they laugh, and

surely it can't be much longer now, can it? Surely the bridegroom must be coming down the road any minute now, right? And as the night winds on and on, and that wine starts to weigh heavier on them, and there's still no sign of that bridegroom, one by one the women drift off to sleep, leaving their lamps burning on into the night, ten women still waiting for the bridegroom to show up.

And then it happens. There's some commotion down the road, and one of the women awakes with a start to hear the rumble of footsteps and voices, a huge crowd of people is coming their way, and she jumps up and starts waking up the others around her, "get up! Get up! He's coming! Wake up!" And as the ten women rub the sleep out of their eyes and smooth out their robes, now they can clearly hear the shouts echoing through the village streets: "Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and meet him! The party is about to begin!" So these ten women have just spent an entire day and night sitting at the side of the road, waiting, watching, preparing, and now the moment they have been waiting for has finally arrived, the person they've been waiting for has finally arrived, the party they've been waiting for is about to begin, and they look down, and their lamps are out of oil.

All ten lamps have burned out in the middle of the night. Now, I ask you: does it matter? The point of the lamp was to give you light while you waited, to give enough light for you during the night while you sat at the side of the road, so the fact that you are out of oil and your lamp is going out, it doesn't really matter now. The bridegroom is here. The party's starting. The lamp isn't needed any longer. Even if the lamp is supposed to play some part in the wedding procession – even if the women have some kind of lamp-related job to do when the bridegroom arrives, it can't be that important. It can't matter that much. The

shout they hear coming down the road is Not “Here is the Bridegroom! I hope you all have lots of lamp oil with you!” It’s “Here is the Bridegroom! Come out and meet him!” The important thing isn’t the lamps, it’s the wedding. It’s the bridegroom.

And yet ... five of these women, after all this time waiting for the bridegroom, after all this time waiting for the party to start, right here at this crucial moment where they’re supposed to join the procession and head for the party, they leave. “We’ll be right back, we’re just going to pop into the market and pick up some more oil. Won’t be long. See you later.” And they leave. And this is ridiculous. Leaving now, after all that waiting and watching and hoping and preparing, just to go get some oil that they don’t actually need any longer, that is ridiculous.

Again, it’s like if you’d spent an entire day and night waiting in line to buy a new iPhone or Taylor Swift tickets, and then after all that time, just as the store is about to open, you decide to leave your spot in line to go buy yourself a hot-dog. Leaving now is ridiculous; the only possible explanation for the baffling decision these five women make is that they must have forgotten what they were actually waiting for.

They’ve forgotten the whole point of this entire adventure. It isn’t the lamps, and it isn’t the oil. They weren’t waiting for their moment to shine, they weren’t waiting for an opportunity to dazzle everyone with the brilliance of their little portable lanterns. They were waiting for the bridegroom, they were waiting for the party, and yet in that moment, right when the bridegroom is about to arrive, right when the party is about to begin, they decide that their lamps are more important than the wedding, and they leave. And because they leave, they

miss the party. When they finally return with lamps filled to the brim with oil, the party has started without them and they can't get in.

So what were they thinking? How could these five women leave at that pivotal moment? How could they think that the most important thing in the world right then and there was having adequate fuel reserves available? How could they forget what they were actually waiting for? Well, I don't think we can be too hard on them, because we do this all the time. We have been given an invitation to come and celebrate everlasting life in the company of the creator of the universe at the wedding banquet of his son.

We are waiting for the bridegroom, for Jesus Christ, waiting to follow him into the greatest party the universe could ever imagine, that is the future our God has in store for us. And while we wait for that future to arrive, fully and completely, while we wait here on earth for Jesus Christ to finish what he started at the cross and the empty tomb, while we wait we have been given all sorts of things to keep ourselves busy, all sorts of little lamps to shine in the darkness of this world. We have work to do, games to play, music to sing, art to create, we have the church where we can serve together and encourage each other while we wait.

All these good blessings here in this world can be used to brighten our lives and the lives of the people around us, but make no mistake, all of this is not the point. All of this is not what we are waiting for. When the bridegroom shows up, when the party is about to start, the last thing you should be worrying about is lamps and oil levels, about your accomplishments and achievements, how hard you've been working, how much you deserve, what you think you still need to do and how you're supposed to shine. Because when the bridegroom shows up,

none of that matters any longer. When Jesus Christ arrives, all of that melts away, it becomes meaningless, immaterial, irrelevant, and in that moment the only thing that matters is Jesus Christ, the only thing that matters is following him into the greatest celebration the universe has ever known, and the only thing that can keep us from joining that party is if, in that moment, we decide we care more about lamps than the love of Jesus Christ, more about our priorities than the Prince of Peace, we start thinking that our work is more important than the one we've been working for, the one we've been waiting for.

When we hear the footsteps on the road, when we hear the cry start to echo through the heavens, "Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and meet him! The party is about to begin!" at that moment, we can set aside all the lamps that have been keeping us company in the night, and we can follow Jesus into the party. In the kingdom of heaven, we don't need lamps; the only light we need is the light of Jesus Christ.

That kingdom is coming, and until it comes, our God calls us to be ready, not to hold on too tightly to all the things of this world, but be ready to let it all go, be ready to drop it all in a heartbeat and run after the bridegroom, to join the celebration and never look back. The bridegroom is coming. Come out and meet him. The party is starting. Don't be late. Amen.