

Sermon – 23rd Pentecost
Matthew 25:1-13
November 12, 2017

“Who Were You Expecting?”

There's a genuine sense of surprise in this parable. A bridegroom appears and those ready enter with him to a banquet - those unprepared miss out. But surprise isn't the issue - no one should have been “surprised” by a delayed bridegroom. In those days a groom went to the bride's home where a ceremony took place for most of the day followed by a festive evening procession to his home for a celebration. Delay shouldn't have mattered – the party was going to last all night – even days - everyone knew that! Traditionally the church *has* interpreted this parable as being about the sudden and unexpected return of Jesus in what we call “*the end times*.” But the parable leaves room for a lesson about participation in the kingdom of God right now and I want to focus today on that. And to do that I want to take us back to a key phrase in this lesson.

In the gospel of Matthew, the phrase “*kingdom of heaven*” is generally understood as being “*the influence of God*”. Luther, in his explanation of the 2nd Petition of the Lord's Prayer – “*thy kingdom come*” says “*God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by grace we believe his holy word and **live a godly life on earth now and in heaven forever.***” The kingdom of God is not so much “place” in Matthew but “perspective”, not so much a point in time as the peculiarity of how time is spent. The “kingdom” to Matthew is located wherever Jesus the king has the ear and heart of people. Therefore we can and ought to interpret this parable as a call to *live expectantly*, lamps trimmed and kept burning not so much so that we can see the bridegroom coming but that we can party with him all night long!

Think of it this way, you can prepare yourself for an unexpected event by trying to prevent or diminish its consequences. A lot of organizations now days prepare what is called “*an emergency preparedness plan*.” Most of us are “preparing” for winter to come – I was writing this message as snowflakes fell outside my office window. Nothing wrong with that, but it's mostly “*defensive*” preparation. The local newspaper in our former home in North Dakota – the Minot Daily News would print an article about this time every year about how to put together a “*winter survival kit*” for your car, so that if you're caught in a big one, you'd be less likely to suffer in it. Several years ago when we lived in the land of perpetual cold called I put together one – I call it my ‘blizzard box’ - though it might be a good thing for me to see about the viability of the Hershey chocolate bars I put in there – the last couple of summers in the trunk of my car may have been hard on their digestibility. But the truth is I don't want to have to use that kit at all. I don't want to have to try to light a candle and melt snow to stay alive for a few days while I wait to be rescued from a snowdrift.

That is one sense of what I call - “*living expectantly*” – when the end comes you'll be ready for it. I don't advocate being unconcerned about one's personal salvation, but because of its “*end times*” reputation this wonderful story from Matthew is seen only as warning not to be caught “*without the oil of faith*” in your personal lamps. But there is another form of preparation to take into account in our lives - the preparation to seize opportunities for future blessing and benefit. Let me give an illustration.

Former NFL head coach and current NBC Sunday Night Football host Tony Dungy – a Christian wrote a book a few years back called “*Quiet Strength*”. Mr. Dungy took over as head football coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 1996, an organization with a legacy of losing. Like any new coach, he immediately set in place principles of how that would change. He hired assistants he was on the same page with and from day one told his players they would strive for certain *team* benchmarks. The phrase he adopted for those principles was “*do what we do*” in anticipation of one day being champions. By the end of the 1999 season, his team played for the conference championship, and in 2002 they had become Super Bowl Champions. Most any athlete will tell you that championships are not won the day of the final competition, but months, even years before in practice, in the training room, in the team meetings that create cohesion and unified purpose among players and coaches. They came to where they “expected” to win.

That “expectation” is what Jesus calls us to in this parable. All 10 of the bridesmaids were invited. The “wise” were distinguished from the “foolish” only because they made provision for a celebration that was not to be missed and even if it were a long time in coming they invested for the wait. A significant part of “*living expectantly*” – our preparation as Christians for the coming of the Lord is expressed through our giving, which we are celebrating today. Giving is an expression that the party has started and is only going to get better, and we intend to be in on it - ready when the kingdom, that is to say, opportunities to express faith and do the work Jesus has given us to do and shown us how to do come. Giving signifies present faith in future realities. It supports our present work, yes, but future possibilities too.

When we go next door after our service today and celebrate our financial commitments to our congregation for the coming year, our prayer time is going to include time for personal discernment of what we should commit as individuals and what for future celebrations of Christ among us we might be part of. It’s not only important to give, but to know how to use what is given, and we need that too. Regardless of that discerning, your commitments today are vital. They express your faith and our hope for the future. They are evidence of your love of Jesus, and those he has called you and this congregation to be watching for and ready to serve -the young, the weary, the grieving, the anxious, the doubting. They are the ones congregations living expectantly expect – they are Christ. Blessed are you and we, who could on that day say “*ah Lord Jesus...we have been expecting you*”. AMEN