

“READY? OR NOT?”

Matthew 25:1-13

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We may not understand all the elements of this parable, and we may not know anything about the ancient Palestinian Jewish wedding customs it reflects, but we do know about waiting, don't we?

We know about waiting that goes on and on.

We are doing a lot of waiting these days...

waiting for deferred doctor's appointments,
for postponed celebrations,
for the day when we can go to a concert or movie and sporting event again,
for regular lunch dates and get-togethers with friends,
for worship to be in-person again,
for school to be less complicated,
for work to be less stressful,
for the time when we can interact and hug more freely,
... for life to get back to normal!

We try to be hopeful and patient, but it's hard.

The people for whom Matthew wrote his gospel had a hard time being hopeful and patient, too. They had expected Jesus to return, but he had not returned, and they were beginning to get discouraged. They were living in a time of change; they lived with tensions and fear created by the occupying forces of the Roman Empire. That context helps explain why Matthew chooses to retell this particular parable of Jesus, with its stark, apocalyptic language and emphasis on staying focused and faithful even when the wait is long.

There are some sort of odd things about this parable.

We wonder why the bride isn't in evidence. The women in the story are waiting for a wedding procession in which typically both the bride and bridegroom would participate. Some ancient versions of Matthew's gospel do say "bridegroom and bride" but the usual telling is probably meant to keep the focus of the metaphor of Jesus as the bridegroom – the church, of course, being the bride.

We wonder what the lamp oil represents. Martin Luther said "faith." Others have said "love" or "good works." We wonder at its scarcity. Isn't there enough for everyone? I thought of the story from the Old Testament about the jar of oil that didn't run out all through a famine. This is different and seems to undercut the abundant grace of the gospel.

And we wonder why the five women with oil for their lamps are not willing to share. Why can't you share faith? The harshness of their refusal seems awfully self-protective in light of Jesus' example of self-sacrifice and what he says to his disciples about "taking up the cross."

We probably shouldn't make too much of those dissonances. Like most parables, this story isn't meant to be a neatly defined allegory as much as to press home its most important point. Like all Jesus' parables, it's about the kingdom of God. In particular, it's about remaining faithful, staying hopeful, being prepared to participate in welcoming the bridegroom... or as Jesus puts it: the kingdom of God.

This is one of the parables sometimes referred to as parables of judgement. The scenario is not very nuanced. It says, "this is serious." It's meant to convey a sense of urgency about responding to Jesus' call. Its main question to everyone who hears it is, "are you ready?"

The question is not, I think, the clichéd "are you ready to meet your maker?" or as you might have heard it, "if you died tonight would you go to heaven?" That is a very individualistic interpretation, and both Jesus' ministry and Matthew's gospel address community contexts.

And in fact, the whole notion of the kingdom of heaven suggests a community... as does the group of waiting but not-all-prepared bridesmaids.

Jesus wants those who follow him to reckon with the questions of their readiness to welcome the reign of God not just at some future time and not just "in their hearts," but now, and in the way they live their lives.

Now, longing for an end to this long, drawn-out pandemic time with all its annoyances and hardship, losses, fears, and uncertainty isn't the same thing as looking for the kingdom of God, no matter how wonderful we think it'll be when this is all over. "Back to normal" isn't the equivalent of the kingdom of God.

But the kingdom of God is near. Jesus says this repeatedly, the gospels tell us. His kingdom parables try to help us see it. These stories are meant to get us to look at our lives and consider where our ultimate commitment lies. And there's no better time for doing that than a hard time. The judgement parables have a special resonance in a time like this.

So the question this parable asks feels relevant: We want the waiting to be over. We want life to be the way it's supposed to be. We feel like it's time. But are we ready?

Have we learned anything?

We want to "get back to our lives," but have we learned to appreciate those lives? The opportunities we have? The gifts we have been given? The web of relationships that connect us? How fragile it all is?

Are we ready to live with more awareness of God's presence and of the world's beauty and the world's pain? To let our hearts be more open to both joy and sorrow?

We want to “get back to normal,” but are we ready to take a good hard look at what we have considered “normal”? Do we have the guts to ask if it really reflects the values of the kingdom of heaven? Are we ready to make some changes in our priorities? Shift our understanding of what “normal” should look like? Maybe let go of some baggage – things, and ideas, and ways of spending our time and energy that neither feed our souls nor contribute to the common good? Are we ready to decide what we really value?

Are we ready to make some sacrifices of money or time or privilege or cherished assumptions for the sake of others whose needs have become more apparent to us during these months? Are we willing to pay a little more at the check-out or at tax time so that people we’ve begun to call “necessary workers” can be better paid? Are we ready to listen to the pain and fear and frustration of the marginalized? Are we ready to see the lonely senior, the frazzled parents, the angry teenager, the addict, the people in line at the food pantry as folks we have responsibility for? Has this time helped us to find more courage for speaking out about problems we’ve tried to deny? To use the language of the gospel, are we ready to take up the cross?

Are we as a church ready for the ways our ministry is likely to be different in the future? Because, you know, having entered the world of live-streaming and zoom meetings, having come up with different ways to do some of the things we always do, simplified other things and let go of a few things... there’s probably no going back to exactly the way we did things before. And why would we think Jesus would call us to do that anyway? The kingdom of God is bigger than “the way we’ve always done it.” The life of God’s people is an ever-changing journey. You know, Jesus says, “follow me,” not “stay there.” Unsettling, yes. But exciting, too. Are we ready to be, not the church we want to be, but the church God will call us to be?

We’ve missed being together, missed coffee hours and passing the peace and singing and sharing prayer concerns. But are we ready to really come together, to build stronger and deeper relationships? “Can the church be a community where we can help one another through the long days and nights of waiting, where we can ask one another, ‘what do you need to keep going?’” (Lundblad, p.259) Are we ready not just to be in the church building together but to be *in* community together, and to not just be community together but to be *in* the community together?

These are all, really, kingdom questions. Because they are about our commitments, and about what vision is going to light our path. And if we aren’t going to ask them now, when would we ask them? What better time could there be?

Kingdom faith is about finding “courage to live as if the kingdom has already [fully] arrived.” Kingdom faith is faith for time like this; it is, one writer says, “a well of resources on which to draw in the midst of life’s deepest troubles.” (McClellan, p. 256)

We are waiting, and we are in the dark, really, about what the future holds. But “waiting is an act of faith.” (McClellan, p. 254) It may be hard, but our waiting still holds the hope that a new day will come. And we have this well of faith to draw upon as we think about the future, these resources of grace and hope and kingdom values to help us be prepared for whatever the future holds ... to be ready for whatever Christ may ask of us ... to keep the light of faith burning even when it’s hard.

Remember what Jesus says earlier in Matthew's gospel: "Let your light shine."

The waiting today's parable urges us to is not the waiting of complacency. It's waiting with a purpose: to be ready always to welcome the kingdom. Faithful waiting is active, expectant, prepared waiting. This strange and challenging time we are living in is the perfect time to practice that kind of waiting.

Jesus said it many times: the kingdom of God is at hand. The questions hovering around us remind us that we can choose whether or not we want to live in it. The parable reminds us that how we respond to that choice matters. It asks if we are ready for ... whatever life in the kingdom has for us next.

It's not a once-and-done thing. Living into the ways of God's kingdom is a "lifelong project." (Hare, p.283)

This journey has its ups and downs. It's guided by the Spirit's gentle support. It's best undertaken in community. It often gains new strength in hard times. And it begins when we are baptized.

Resources:

Matthew (Interpretation Commentary) by Douglas R. A. Hare

Essays on Matthew 25:1-13 by Robert M. McClellan and Barbara K. Lundblad in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, volume 2*.