

“Are You Ready? What Are You Waiting For?”

Amos 5:18-24; Matthew 25:1-13

Generosity Sunday (23rd Sunday After Pentecost)

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November 12, 2017

Are you Ready? What are you waiting for? I can't count the number of times I've heard these questions, nor the number of times I asked them myself—either of myself or of others. And as often as not, the two questions have gone together, bookends, maybe, or a larger query of preparedness. Are you ready? What are you waiting for?

I remember my teacher asking me if I was ready when it was time to start swimming lessons—as I stood there on the edge of the pool, swinging my arms, counting to three. Then five. Then ten, delaying the inevitable entry into what I knew was pretty cold water.

What was I waiting for? For the butterflies to pass. For the water to warm up. For my teacher to stop telling me to jump on in. For my big brother, already a flying fish to my tadpole, to stop laughing at me.

I remember asking myself if I was ready as I contemplated answering the call to go to seminary and become a pastor—after spending more than half of my twenty four years telling people I didn't want to be a pastor just because my dad, grandpa, and great-grandpa had been pastors. Even though I had been active in church even when I didn't have to—after confirmation, all four years of college, even during study abroad in Tanzania, when getting to the English service in town meant a couple of hours on busses to and from.

What was I waiting for? For the people closest to me to say that they actually could see me as a pastor. For the seminary of my choice to offer a financial aid package that actually made it worth picking up and moving to Berkeley, California. For my candidacy committee here in St. Paul to not freak out when I said I wanted to study somewhere other than Luther. For my fiancé to say, sure, she'd love to drop everything and so that she could end up being a pastor's wife for the rest of her days.

Are you Ready? Are you ready, you bridesmaids ten? Are you keeping awake, staying alert, keeping watch? Are your lamps trimmed and burning? Do you have enough oil—enough to last through both any foreseen and unforeseen delays that may come your way? Are you ready to hurry up and wait? Are you ready for a sort of pre-Advent longing, for a time of waiting for the waiting to begin? Are you ready to be surprised, even by the very one you've been expecting all this time? Are you ready to show up and stay put even when your oil runs out, even when the waiting goes on well into the night? Are you ready?

What are you waiting for, you ten? Why are you waiting at all—prepared or unprepared? What are you waiting to see, what are you waiting to discover? Who is the delayed one, the long-expected one, the dare-I-say “latecomer”

that is keeping you up at night (or not keeping you up at night, as it turns out)? You're waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom, right? That's whose approach, whose entrance onto the scene, whose tardiness is causing your drowsiness, is causing you to sleep, no matter how wise or how foolish you might be. But you know what you are waiting for and why, don't you? You know that the arrival of the bridegroom, whenever that might be, can only mean one thing—the start of the wedding feast, the kick-off of the party, party of a lifetime, a wedding feast that has no end, a party that literally lasts until the end of time. Isn't that what you're waiting for?

Now, I have to tell you, church, that I don't quite know what to make of this parable we have before us today. I don't exactly know what the parable is trying to say—and I have to tell you that some of the age-old explanations for it don't really make sense to me. For years—centuries, maybe—this parable has been interpreted to be a story about the second coming, about the eventual return of Jesus (“the Bridegroom”) to come and meet up with the church (“his bride”) and so the bridesmaids, it's often been posited, are us: foolish or wise, worthy or unworthy, saved or unsaved, ready or not for his return.

But the trouble I have with this reading of the parable—beyond the simple reminder that parables are meant to be stories that exist in the universe of their own realities, and not allegories where everything stands for something else—the trouble I have with this is that I hear the voice of Jesus and the core of his gospel message contradicting so much in the narrative of this parable.¹

Even from the start: that half of the bridesmaids were foolish and half were wise. I hear the Apostle Paul saying “If you think you are wise in this age, you should become fools. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God.”

Or when the bridesmaids—wise and foolish alike—fall asleep, I hear Jesus' words to Peter, James, and John in the garden of Gethsemane: “couldn't you stay away with me one hour more?”

Or when the so-called wise bridesmaids say that they won't share their oil with the so-called foolish bridesmaids whose lamps have gone out, I hear Jesus' words from the sermon on the Mount: “Give to everyone who begs from you and do not refuse those who want to borrow from you.”

For years, I've heard that this passage is about being ready for the coming of the Lord. And on a certain level, I still think that it is. But now I wonder: maybe this passage *isn't* about being ready in the sense of having all your stuff together,

¹I am grateful to David Hensen and his blogpost for his creative reading of this text and its meaning <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2014/11/the-breaking-of-the-bridesmaids-how-scripture-undermines-a-parable/>, accessed 11/11/2017.

having predicted and plotted and planned for every contingency, having enough oil and oil to spare. Maybe it's not about being ready in the sense of having a concise and comprehensive strategic plan, of anticipating all the possibilities of when and how and with whom the bridegroom might arrive. Maybe this parable is about being ready, but in a whole different way. Maybe this parable, which begins not with the typical words, "The Kingdom of God is Like," but rather, "Then, the Kingdom of God will be like" this. Could be like this. Might be like this.

Maybe being ready is not as much about plotting our every step, knowing without a doubt our next move, moving with certainty from one clear goal to another. Maybe being ready is more about simply showing up. Being present. Putting ourselves "out there." Coming alongside those in need. Walking with others, and then making the road by walking. Could it be that in being called to be ready, we are called, like the so-called foolish bridesmaids, simply to continue to show up and wait, even with our flickering lamps and dwindling supply of oil? Are we ready?

Are we ready? Are we ready to simply show up? And having shown up, are we ready to give of ourselves generously, sacrificially, even extravagantly? Are we ready to give out of our abundance and not out of our leftovers, our reserve, our cushions? Generosity, after all, is one of the fruits of the spirit, a mark of discipleship, a sure sign that God is active in our lives, both individually and as a community.

Are we ready both to give and to grow in our giving in order to continue and expand the ways Christ the King cares for one another, serves our neighborhood and community, and enters God's mission and shares God's love from right here to literally the ends of the earth?

For the past 56 years, we have been a congregation that generously entered into God's mission here in New Brighton and beyond. The kind of work we do together as a congregation—worshiping God, caring for one another, serving our neighbors near and far, forming the faith of our children, youth, and adults, and elders—all of which we are able to do more faithfully and more efficiently by pooling our resources. And as we noted in the generosity packet, we have the capacity to do so much more.

Based on the median household income in our community, if everyone at CTK were to tithe, that is, give 10% of their income for the work of the church, we'd end up close to tripling our offering income for the year. Or, more modestly, more realistically, perhaps if everyone of our giving households were to increase their giving by one percentage point, we'd increase our offerings by more than

\$300,000 a year. Imagine what we could do to worship together, care for one another, deepen our faith, and serve our neighbors with another \$300,000.

What are we waiting for? Are we waiting for a definitive five-year plan, an inalterable, immutable spending plan that anticipates every ministry opportunity, every economic downturn, every roof repair or a/c replacement, every retirement transition, every possible expenditure down to the last dollar? While I know that staff, council, finance committee and others have gotten more precise and accurate at such work, and that we're committed to keeping expenditures as close to revenue as we can, no one can completely foresee every expenditure necessary to do the ministry we're called to do here and now—especially as our ministry seeks to respond to a world that is changing so rapidly.

So what are we waiting for? Like the wise bridesmaids, we can do our best to plan out how much we'll need for what we're planning to do, building in some extra for unexpected delays, opportunities, etc. And, like the so-called foolish bridesmaids, we can continue simply to show up, to be present in those places where we can share the good news with others—BE the good news for others—even beyond our perceived capacity to do so.

Are we Ready? Are we ready to share Jesus' good news to one another, and to the world, even if we look a bit foolish, even if no one seems to care? Are we ready to wage reconciliation? Are we ready to tear down walls and build bridges? Are we ready to forgive as we have been forgiven, to love the world that God so loves?

Are we ready to try a brand new thing? Are we ready to go out on a few limbs, or as Pastor John said in his Reformation sermon: to "take risks, miss big, and try again?"

Are we ready to rejoice in the Lord always, to be strong and courageous, to praise our savior all the day long, to be servants to one another, signs of God's kingdom come?

Are we ready to set aside our privilege and reach out to all people as those made in God's image as well are? Are we ready to let justice roll down like waters, to let righteousness run like an ever-flowing stream? Are we ready to go out and be met by the one who is coming soon, coming again, coming in power, coming to save us? Are we ready?

What are we waiting for?