

October 11, 2020
The Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 27—Year A
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Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Psalm 78:1-7
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

In a remarkable coincidence, to top off this week of waiting, we have a Gospel reading about waiting.

It's yet another parable from Matthew that describes the coming kingdom of God. To provide some context, know that the setup is typical of how marriages play out in the first-century Mediterranean world. A bridegroom has gone to collect his bride at the house of the bride's father. He'll soon be returning with her to the house of his own father, where ten young women of his own household wait to welcome them. Five of these young women are "wise" and five are "foolish." By the time the delayed groom returns, only the wise ones are ready, and therefore the groom allows only the wise ones to attend the wedding banquet.

The parable is almost always understood allegorically: The bridegroom is Jesus, and we're the bridesmaids. We better be ready for that unknown moment when Jesus returns to render judgment, or we might find ourselves on the wrong side of the divide. Even those who agree on this understanding disagree about how whether it's Jesus' idea or Matthew's. I'll return to that shortly.

This week I had a lot of sympathy for those five foolish bridesmaids. This week felt not only interminable, but my productivity took a nosedive. I was comforted by learning that I was not the only homilist who found it impossible to prepare a homily while waiting. One of my seminary classmates posted this yesterday afternoon on Facebook: "SERMON PREP: Ten minutes of silence? I feel like I've had enough of talking." This brought forth conversation on the importance of contemplation in the Christian tradition. Regarding the idea of ten minutes of silence, one of my friend's parishioners said, "Do it. I dare you." To which my priest friend replied, "*you'd* be like 'That was deep,' and *everyone else* would be like 'well looks like the livestream froze [sic; emphasis mine].'"¹ Obviously, I decided not to go in the direction of silence, though my comments are going to be shorter than usual.

Because we couldn't help ourselves, Jakki and I watched election returns every night this week. I believe it was on Thursday that I had a moment of flashback. The pundits were still revved up, but the numbers were just not budging, and they were flailing for something new to say. Into my mind popped an image from the old television series, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Remember, in the show, character Mary Richards works at fictional Minneapolis TV station WJN as an associate producer of the six o'clock news. In this particular episode, it's election night in Minneapolis, and Mary is in charge of WJN's election coverage. A huge midwestern snowstorm has blown in during the afternoon, and it's raging as the polls close. The first vote tallies come in—by teletype—and then all means of communication crash. All night, the only results they have to report are in the mayor's race: Turner, 85, and Mitchell, 23. As the night wears on, anchor Ted Baxter is reduced to exhausted babbling. Early the next morning, Chuckles the Clown arrives at the station, dressed for his children's show. He has the morning newspaper, with its headline declaring the mayoral winner. Mary assigns Chuckles the Clown to announce the results, so that the news team can finally go home.²

Having Chuckles the Clown announce the results provides a funny ending to the story, but I wonder whether a more subversive message was implied. After all, that episode debuted in the winter of 1970 to 1971. Even before this memory erupted, I'd been having flashbacks to that era of politics. The civil rights movement, the women's movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the environmental movement—it was all swirling around. That era also brought the beginning of the Pride movement, though that was so far out of the mainstream that it didn't rise to the same level of notice. We all know how ugly the pushback to all this got. It was a hard time. "America: love it or leave it" was far from the worst of it. Adults said, and believed, such cruel and ugly things. Kids growing up with those parents learned that it was okay.

But, of course, it was not okay. Those times were hard, but they weren't fruitless. Even then, there were other messengers with other messages: Don't lie. Don't steal. Don't cheat. Do share. Do be helpful and kind and compassionate. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Over time, those messages got results.

Back to Matthew. As I have said several times recently, we should always be aware that Matthew's Gospel reflects Matthew's community. As we read, we have to ask: did Jesus say that, or did Matthew's community do a little editing?

Of the four gospels, Matthew's is the most apocalyptic. Matthew's community expected the day of judgment, featuring a second coming of the messiah, to be on the immediate horizon. But it turned out not to be on the horizon at all. More than two millennia later, it still hasn't happened. Since we're still waiting, what do we even do with Matthew's apocalyptic?

Remember, Matthew's version of what Jesus was saying much have been influenced by the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem. It's perhaps not so different than the way our perspectives—and our fears—are shaped by the tumult of our own day. Maybe we start by agreeing with Matthew that—whatever the tumult, whatever the fear—the kingdom is coming. But maybe that coming is happening in a way that is much more measured and gradual and even subtle than Matthew described. Maybe the coming of the kingdom is a lot less like fireworks, and a lot more like spending the night at Turner, 85, and Mitchell, 23.

I'll say it again: the kingdom is coming, though it has not yet arrived in all its fullness. The place we occupy is always neither here nor there. And so, we wait. We wait, not for the dramatic event that will either save or damn us, but for the small incremental edging toward the fully redeemed world that God promises. As we wait, we ready. Not necessarily for our own sake, but for the sake of that reconciled world and for all its occupants. We trim the wicks and refill the oil by seeking racial reconciliation, by stewarding creation, by welcoming immigrants.

A couple of weeks ago, our Gospel reading included this:

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus said, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”³

For Christians, all those dos and don'ts really add up to this: Love your neighbor as yourself. As you love your neighbor as yourself, you love God. Loving our neighbor is exactly how we love Jesus even as we await his return.

Notes

¹ Facebook exchange between the Rev. Stephen Hassett and Jim Murphy, November 7, 2020.

² *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, “The Snow Must Go On” (season 1, episode 8), first aired November 7, 1970.

³ Matthew 22:36-40 NRSV.