

Hanging In There

[Matthew 25:1-3]

Parable of the ten bridesmaids.

K Karpen, Sunday, November 6, 2005
Twenty-fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Sacrament of Holy Communion

[Matthew 25:1-13, "Hanging In There," K Karpen, November 6, 2005]

"Keep awake, therefore; for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Once again we have a strange story told by Jesus, perhaps made stranger by Matthew's re-telling of it. The basic point of the story is fairly simple, and it's an important point: Be ready—prepare yourself for the long haul. The struggle may take longer than we think.

Matthew, in general, is eager for the return of Jesus. He is eager for that eschatological moment when things are set right. And Matthew believes that that day can be hastened, or at least prepared for, by the deeds of love and justice that Jesus asked from those who consider themselves his followers.

And so he presents this story, and he sets it at the end of the ministry of Jesus, together with the parable of the talents and the last Judgment, the separating of the sheep from the goats.

Matthew 25 is a powerful chapter of scripture. OK, so what's the story? There are 10 bridesmaids. Each has her lamp. They wait for the bridegroom, code for Jesus, but the bridegroom is delayed. He doesn't show up. All 10 of them fall asleep. Waiting. So far, they're all the same.

When the bridegroom finally comes, it's midnight—kind of late to begin a wedding reception. The bridesmaids wake up! It's time to go in and light up the party! And all the bridesmaids have their lamps, and all their lamps have oil. But only half of the bridesmaids have enough oil with them to sustain them for the long haul.

Maybe they had just hoped he'd come on time; and their hope made them shortsighted. Maybe they thought that things would happen the way they were supposed to; and so often they just don't. Maybe they even thought that their meager supply of oil would be stretched miraculously, as it had for their ancestors in the days of Judas Maccabbeus. (Let's bring a little Hannukah theme in today.) But God doesn't always work like that. And sometimes we've just got to help God out.

Oil, of course, is deeply symbolic in Jewish tradition. Sometimes it represents the Torah, the word and way of God (Deuteronomy Rabbah 7). Sometimes it represents in general good deeds, the deeds of love and justice the prophets pleaded for and God waits for.

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We don't have the same feeling for oil in our culture and times. Sure oil is precious, more so all the time. But it's also dirty & crude. Sometimes it serves as a symbol of corporate greed. Something we sometimes fight and die over. But here, don't think of it as crude oil. Don't think of dead dinosaurs. Think olive oil. Spreader of joy. Giver of life and giver of light, as we have here in this story.

So oil is a symbol of deeds of love and justice. And oil has allusions also to the coming Messianic Kingdom. What does Messiah mean? Someone who has been anointed with oil by God. What does Christ mean? Same thing, in Greek. Someone on whose head has been poured the anointing oil. Again, you'll do better to think olive, rather than crude.

In our story, all 10 women come with oil in their lamps to lend light & life to the party. But only 5 of them understand that sometimes things take longer than they should. That doesn't mean that the right thing won't happen eventually; it just means that it may take longer than it should. So be ready. So be prepared. Hang in there. Be ready.

John Wesley was once asked what he'd do if he knew Jesus would return the next day. He said, I'd go home and go to bed. But I'd wake up in the morning and go on with my work, because I'd want him to find me doing what he'd appointed. Like the bumper sticker that came out a few years ago, "Jesus is coming. Look busy!"

But things may take longer than they should. It's like William Cullen Bryant once wrote, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." So be ready for the long haul. Hang in there. Don't get shut out of the party before it starts—as happens with our 5 foolish bridesmaids. They come back to find the door closed on them.

That's a tough part of the parable. We Methodists think of ourselves as people of "open hearts, open minds, open doors." So many of us, conservatives and liberals alike, were shocked and dismayed and disappointed this past week when the Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church, sort of the Supreme Court of Methodism, ruled that it was OK for a minister in Virginia to deny church membership to a man who came to worship and sang in the choir, because he was gay.

Oh my goodness. That ruling prompted a swift & unanimous rebuttal from our Council of Bishops. More importantly, Methodists from Maine to Minnesota, from California to Kansas, reacted viscerally to this assault on the body of Christ.

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Now, I have no doubt in my mind that this situation and all the questions surrounding the issue of homosexuality will be settled on the side of truth & justice—on the side of the gospel. But oh, friends, it may take longer than we think. It may take longer than we've planned on. The oil we have with us may not be enough for the struggle. It may begin to run out. We may be ready to give up on the church before God does. And we may find ourselves in the situation of the wise and foolish bridesmaids.

But I have a better idea. I have a better hope. I have a sweeter wish. I have an oilier vision than Matthew. I see those of you with a bit more spiritual stamina for the struggle. A bit more oil for your lamps, pouring some out for those of us who are about to give up. And may that sweet oil overflow our lamps. Drip all around us into sweet deeds of love, justice & resistance. Giving us the patience to run the race God has set before us. Now, in these times. Finding new ways to move the church along the way. New ways to work with Jesus as we look to the coming of Christ.