

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost –Sunday, November 8, 2020
Matthew 25:1-13

As we rejoice in the gift of this new day, so may the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love for you; now and for ever. Amen.

Weddings. Could there possibly be a more anxious and emotion-filled event than a wedding? Rarely are there times in our lives with just this crazy-making combination of fear, hope, excitement, frustration, and anticipation. Expectations are through the roof – formed by cultural norms and powerfully fueled by the wedding industry. Weddings are ceremonies that are both personal and communal, so all involved bring their own expectations and assumptions. How many times has the anxiety of a wedding brought about tears, arguments, and accidents? The groomsman who forgets to bring the ring; the uncle who got lost and never made it; the gown that no longer fits; the bridesmaid who gets her heel caught in the hem of her dress and pulls out the seam right before show-time; the global pandemic that blows away all the careful planning.

Many brides hire wedding planners. These consultants help to narrow down the seemingly endless options and become the master of all the various details. They offer the hopeful promise, that someone is actually on top of it all and will prevent disaster. But even an excellent wedding planner cannot prevent all mishaps. Even all the careful planning, managing of details, and careful organizing cannot prevent the unexpected. The unexpected just happens, despite our best efforts.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus uses this most human and emotionally loaded event as the context for a parable about God's kingdom. This parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids is unique to the Gospel of Matthew. In it, ten bridesmaids take their lamps and go to meet the bridegroom. The five wise bridesmaids who are prepared for the bridegroom's arrival are rewarded with entrance to the wedding banquet, while the foolish five who are not prepared are rejected. This scripture has a clear apocalyptic moral: "be prepared for the day of judgment."

As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" The turning point in the parable is in these two verses. The bridegroom is delayed. He is so late in arriving that the bridesmaids have fallen asleep while waiting. They must be awakened and quickly trim their lamps that have gone out. The bridegroom is late – and the wise bridesmaids have plenty of oil for their lamps while the foolish ones do not.

So, what is the nature of their foolishness? It doesn't seem to be that they fall asleep, since both the wise and the foolish maidens do so. It doesn't seem to be that they didn't properly attend to their lamps, since both the wise and foolish maidens had let their lamps go out. It doesn't seem to be that they were lazy, since both the wise and the foolish maidens get up right away and begin to trim their lamps. Moreover, the poor foolish bridesmaids even ran around town trying to find an oil dealer who would be open for business at midnight. No, it seems that their foolishness lay in their assumptions of what the bridegroom would do and their lack of preparedness for the unexpected. They assumed this wedding would be like all others and that this bridegroom will do as expected.; after all, it is only reasonable to think so.

But this is a different kind of bridegroom, one that doesn't concern himself with cultural expectations and conventional rules of etiquette. This bridegroom plays by his own rules. This bridegroom is God in Christ, and God is often doing the unexpected. God is mystery, and the trouble always starts when we forget that – when we assume that God will follow our rules and assumptions. In the end, the foolish bridesmaids were not ready when the bridegroom arrived – they were not prepared to wait – and so they were left outside of the wedding banquet.

As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" In his book about the parables

of Jesus, Episcopal priest and author Robert Farrar Capon writes that this parable describes the course of the world as it really is. Things change and the unexpected happens – frequently. We think we understand how things work, only to find that the rules no longer apply. As Capon writes, Jesus pronounces his “[criticism] of unfaith, the judgment pronounced on those who thought that history could be brought home by something neater and more plausible than the mystery.” Our God is not a god of human reason – not a god that follows the rules we construct. Our God is mystery, and we should never forget this.

If our God were one who followed our rules, then we would have a god made in our image rather than the other way around. If our religion were mere magic, there would be no need for faith. But we then would have a relationship that is transactional rather than covenantal. It is only because God does not play by our rules but only by His own inscrutable ones that faith is necessary. We walk blindly the path before us not because we can see the way but because we trust that it is, in fact, taking us to God.

As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!” This parable speaks to the early Christians of Matthew’s community who had to adjust to the reality that Jesus did not return as they expected and that their mission was to wait hopefully, and in the meantime to live faithfully and courageously. Two millennia later, we, too, are called to live in a time where we must hold tightly to our belief that the bridegroom is in fact coming, despite all evidence to the contrary. We are also called to live faithfully, courageously, and hopefully, and so, we wait purposefully. In order to do so, we must abandon our misplaced belief that God will act reasonably – that God will act as we expect. Time and again, our scriptures tell the tales of men and women who expect God to do something reasonable and who are then surprised by God’s inherent unreasonableness.

God is mystery. And thank God for that! I don’t want a small god. I don’t want a god who seems more human than divine. In the end, I guess I don’t really want a god that is reasonable and that I understand. Though I might feel temporarily comforted by such a god, ultimately this would not be a sovereign God. This would not be the living God who is the Creator of all things, seen and unseen. This would not be a transcendent God, but rather one imprisoned within the confines and fragility of creation. This would be a god of death only, and not of resurrection.

God is mystery. And mystery is a strange land, indeed. It one in which we may live, trust, and enjoy, but can never fully anticipate. And so, we wait. We wait faithfully, remembering God’s covenant and His work in Jesus. We wait hopefully, because of God’s eternal promise to “fear not, for I am with you.” We wait expectantly, knowing that the unexpected will happen, for that is who God has been revealed to be. And we wait purposefully, courageously carrying out Jesus’ charge to us to make disciples and to continue his work of reconciliation in the world. And as we wait, we remember to keep enough oil on hand for the lamps for when the bridegroom appears – to do the necessary work for the kingdom that is always coming and breaking into the world.

This morning, we celebrate the fourth Sunday of our Annual Pledge Gathering Campaign at Good Shepherd. Each year, our parish launches a campaign in which we ask you to support the church’s mission and ministry by making a financial pledge. This pledge is not merely a gift to the church in support of what the Holy Spirit is doing with and through us, but is also a response – a holy response in recognition of all our many blessings bestowed by God.

If you have not already done so, I invite you to make a financial pledge now in faithfulness to God’s call to us and to Good Shepherd. I invite you to offer your best gifts in full recognition and gratitude that all our gifts originate from the good gifts that God has given us. I invite you to offer your gift in response to the God revealed in Jesus, who loves his good creation and who bids us to love each other. And I invite you to offer your gift in thankfulness for the grace to live faithfully, courageously, and hopefully, even as we wait for the next unexpected thing God will do.

Amen.