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### THE WAITING

Two thousand years after the resurrection and the ascension, we're still waiting for JESUS to return.

- I don't think anyone in Matthew's community could have possibly imagined that it would be this long.
  - Which means that we need to think about how we hear, interpret, and incorporate this parable in our understanding of Scripture and, more importantly, into our lives as Christians.

The typical interpretation is simply to hear this parable as a stern warning to be prepared, to not let it catch us by surprise, to keep waiting and getting ready, and to not miss JESUS' return.

- I've often preached on this parable from precisely this perspective, and always with an "or else" feel as the "foolish" bridesmaids who are shut out from the final party by the irritated bride groom.

But, particularly when the delay of JESUS' return is not 50 years, but 2000, several questions came to mind as I looked at this text.

- First, why wouldn't the so-called "wise" bridesmaids share what they have?
  - Must anxiety about the future drive us to a scarcity mindset, fearing that there won't be enough if I give up more of what is mine?
  - What might we do to wait for JESUS and live with a greater sense of grace and generosity?
- Second, I wonder if the actual act of foolishness on the part of those other five bridesmaids was not that they didn't bring extra oil, but rather that they ran out to look for more?
  - Which was worse? To greet the bridegroom without oil, or to miss him completely while looking for oil?
  - Certainly, there are ways we can prepare today for the return of JESUS, certainly and particularly by looking for the face of JESUS in the need of our neighbor.
    - But shouldn't we also take some comfort in the promise that we are justified by grace, and not by being prepared?

Though they may not be Matthew's, I think these are good questions to consider.

- But rather than jumping into them, I thought perhaps we might this year make a transition from that message of needing to be ready, and instead focus simply on this time before JESUS returns—what we might call "the waiting."

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Tom Petty's song, "The Waiting," comes to mind, with him adding a third syllable to "wa-it-ing":

- *"The waiting is the hardest part. Every day you see one more card. You take it on faith, you take it to heart. The waiting is the hardest part."*

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Before talking about the waiting, though, let me share a little background on the context of a Jewish wedding in JESUS' day:

following the engagement, often arranged by the fathers of the couple, a period of betrothal takes place.

- The bride chooses her attendants, or bridesmaids—usually unmarried friends.
- The groom also chooses his.
  - And the whole town knows about this engagement and watches—especially watching the groom.

The groom has work to do, you see.

- He must build a new house for his bride, taking perhaps up to a year.
  - Everybody watches the progress—most of all the bride.
    - And, because there can be no contact between bride and groom until the wedding, she sends her bridesmaids as spies to find out how things are coming.
  - When it becomes clear that the house is nearly completed, the bridegroom's father must approve of the house.
    - I mean, family reputation is at stake here.
  - After the house has been approved, the groom's family begins moving food into the house.
    - The whole town would be invited and there must be enough food for everyone.
    - And, as I mentioned a few weeks ago when we had the parable of the wedding feast, the party would take place in the front room and out in front of the house, while the bride and the groom are in the back room having their honeymoon.
      - If the marriage is not consummated in seven days, it is called off, but it might take that long so there has to be lots of food.
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So, the bride's spies have reported that the house is at last ready, the food has been brought in, and so the wedding will take place very soon.

- Now the bride calls all her bridesmaids together—in this case, ten of them—for a slumber party, though it more likely would be during the day—and to wait for the groom to come.
    - At some point the groom and his friends show up to, in a sense, kidnap the bride.
      - Her attendants would follow through the town or across the fields, using their lamps if necessary to see their way.
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This is where the parable begins, though because it is a parable, it really is telling us something, not about life in that day, but about GOD'S Kingdom.

- So here, the bridegroom is JESUS, and HIS bride is the Church.
  - HIS desire is to bring HIS bride into the House HE has prepared for them.
- As a whole, we the Church, are HIS bride, but individually, we are also the bridesmaids, serving the bride and waiting for the wedding.

But the point of the parable is not necessarily constant readiness.

- "Keep awake" does not imply that we should never sleep, standing vigil through the ages until CHRIST returns.
    - In fact, all the bridesmaids, wise and foolish, are asleep when the shout announces the groom's approach.
  - Instead, I can't help but wonder if the distinctive focus of this parable is that the expected ONE'S arrival may be delayed.
    - At the time Matthew wrote his gospel, the Christian community may have been waiting for JESUS' return for fifty years or more.
      - Most of the eye-witnesses to the life of JESUS were likely dead.
  - Where was JESUS? Yes, the waiting is the hardest part.
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It may be difficult today in the twenty-first century to think about waiting or preparing for the return of JESUS.

- Yet the difficulty of waiting is still present.
  - How long must we wait until adequate steps are taken to prevent gun violence, or until equal rights for all are achieved, or we are able to focus on those things that unite us, rather than those things that divide us?
- We still wait today, but it's also important to realize that not all waiting is the same.

Some waiting is good.

- Like for the birth of a child, or the closing on the house of your dreams, or the promotion in a job, or acceptance to college.
  - This kind of waiting is joyful and filled with anticipation.

But some waiting is hard.

- Waiting to see if you will be able to get pregnant, or for the foreclosure on your house because you couldn't make a payment, or the doctor's report to see if the cancer has returned.
  - And whether you're waiting for something good or something bad, when the anticipated arrival is delayed, it is almost anxiety provoking:
    - Why haven't I heard?
    - Why haven't they arrived yet?
    - When will I have the results?
      - The wa-it-ing is the hardest part!

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So, perhaps we can think about how we live during the waiting.

- When the waiting is for something positive, can we slow down to see moments of preparation and anticipation as blessing.
  - Can waiting at times be seen as gift rather than obstacle?
    - Perhaps practice in waiting for those things we look forward to can increase our patience and perseverance in other areas.
- When the waiting is not for something positive, or when it's made harder by delay, can we remind those who wait that they do not wait alone?
  - The obvious tragedy in this parable is that five of the bridesmaids brought no oil at all.
    - They didn't just run out.
    - They didn't bring any; didn't make plans; didn't anticipate delay.
  - But the other tragedy, again, is that the five who brought flasks of oil would not share.
    - As we wait, can we learn from these ungenerous bridesmaids and not leave people to wait alone, so that no one in our communities has the isolating experience of being locked out?

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Communities of faith often wonder what we can offer to a culture increasingly disinterested with organized religion.

- Might we offer ourselves as a community that...
  - wait, maybe that's enough!
- Can we offer ourselves as a genuine community in a world where more and more people feel isolated?
- A community that celebrates together?
- A community that slows down to prepare together?
- And waits together, making sure that when the waiting is the hardest part, that no one—not one person—has to wait alone?

The wa-it-ing is the hardest part.

- We can't change that reality.
- But we can change the experience by waiting together, in Christian solidarity, community, and fellowship.
  - The waiting is the hardest part, but together, it won't be quite so hard.