

November 12, 2017 (Journey worship)

TEXT: Matthew 25:1–13

TITLE: Waiting by Faith

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I seem to recall that an inordinate time of my childhood was spent waiting. I remember waiting for the school bus, waiting for a turn to play on the swing or go down the slide, waiting in the cafeteria line for lunch, waiting in dentist's and doctor's offices for check-ups, waiting at the beauty parlor for my Mom to finish getting her hair done. I remember being told to wait—don't cross the street until the light changes; don't eat those cookies, it will spoil your dinner; don't go out to play until you've practiced piano—and the most famous line of all: Just wait until your father gets home!

Grown-ups also have to spend a lot of time waiting: waiting on hold, waiting at traffic lights, waiting in check-out lines and post office queues and for sermons like this to be finished. But now we fill up that wait time with other things, usually involving our Smartphones or laptops. We check our e-mail, scroll through Facebook or Snapchat, listen to music, shop on Amazon, read a newspaper online, or sometimes actually call someone with our phones. Yet somewhere between childhood and adulthood we lost the art of waiting.

Waiting used to be a creative thing when we were little. Yes, it was annoying, but it also was a time when we doodled on the restaurant placemat; we played license plate games on car trips; we talked with our neighbor in line while waiting for the school lunch. We remained focused on the goal even as we waited. Now we only see our wait times as impediments to our goals—something to be mindlessly filled and endlessly lamented. We tell others how we hate waiting, even as scripture tells us lots of stories about people who had to wait—the sower of the seeds who waited for the wheat to emerge, the disciples who kept watch while Jesus went off to pray in the garden of Gethsemane, or the example in the parable we read from Matthew 25 about ten maidens waiting for the wedding feast to finally begin. Complaining about waiting vs. living faithfully while waiting. One of these two approaches is better than the other, and I'll warn you right now, the bible wins this argument.

In Matthew's parable, ten bridesmaids had little to do except wait. Officially they were attendants for the bride, waiting at her house for the groom's family to finish negotiations about the dowry and wedding gifts to be exchanged. At some point the groom will finally arrive at the bride's home and, with his family and friends, escort her to his family home. The bridesmaids' one task was to be prepared for this celebratory procession from one house to the other, no matter what time of day or night it finally happened. Point #1: You can't wait effectively unless you stay focused on what you're waiting for. If waiting is just lost time, mindlessly filled with distractions and apps and time-killers, then of course it will not be

productive. By staying focused, staying alert about how our choices today affect our lives (and others' lives) tomorrow, we have a chance to wait faithfully. Here's a story about being focused. Along the coast of New Brunswick, Canada there's a harbor that can only be reached by navigating a narrow path between dangerous rocks and sandbars. Back in 1849, the townspeople installed a trident shaped post that held three red gas lamps, whose light was visible as far as three miles out at sea. The trident was installed in such a way that if sailors looked and only saw one or two lights, it meant they weren't on a safe course. Only if they could see all three lights clearly and individually did they know they were on the correct path into the harbor. In a similar way, losing our focus as we seek to follow Christ inevitably means we are putting ourselves at risk and not heading toward safe harbor in the Lord.

We're told that each of the ten bridesmaids had an oil lamp. Matthew divides them up into two groups—wise ones who carried extra oil in their flasks and foolish ones who didn't plan ahead. A simple sermon for this morning would involve me wagging my finger at yinz and simply saying "*Be wise bridesmaids and do good works; don't be foolish and unworthy and fail to pull your spiritual weight.*" The problem is that a sermon like that is based too much on works righteousness theology—the idea that you earn God's love by what you do. If that truly was the message of this passage, then the answer for us is to get to work like God's busy bees, buzzing around doing countless acts of charity and volunteerism all the time. You need to do more—don't be lazy or doze off—the door is closing on the feast of the Lord and you don't want to be left out! But that's not the real, deep message of this passage.

Go back to thinking about waiting when you were a child. In most cases, no child ever waits alone. Children stand in line with classmates as they wait for lunch at school or a drink at the drinking fountain or as they sit on a curb waiting for a parade to come down the street. And even when they are physically alone, they create companionship with imaginary friends or have conversations with stuffed animals or nearby pets. Waiting is inherently communal for children, while for adults, waiting is an individual affront—something I, and I alone, have to endure. So I sigh and check my phone again or honk my horn or change lanes at the grocery store and with my self-centered behavior generally make myself into an unwelcome guest at the Lord's celebration.

Notice, though, that in Matthew's parable, there are no individuals mentioned. The bridesmaids are never identified by name; they are simply the foolish ones and the wise ones. The important distinction here isn't a matter of status or grade-point averages or salary or shoe size. It is solely a matter of how they choose to wait—just as it is solely a matter of how we choose to wait. Are we focused on a vision of the future that is shaped today by our faith in Jesus Christ? Are we preparing for the future, in times of both light and darkness, as a people wise in using our resources so that all may see and walk in safety and live gracefully? Do we spend this in-between time together, aware of one another's

needs today even as we wait expectantly for the wedding banquet of the Lord, when all will be fed—all will be healed—all will be well?

In the book of Proverbs, it says, *The light of the righteous rejoices, but the lamp of the wicked goes out.* And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us, *No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but puts it on a lamp-stand, and it gives light to all in the house* (Mt 5:15). We are Christ's lamp in a dark world, offering light, safety and warmth for all who walk beside us on the roads of this life—all who are waiting for the same things, hoping for the same things, anxious to welcome the promised Lord and Bridegroom.

But let's go still deeper into this parable. Think about this for a moment. Where were the foolish maidens supposed to go in order to get oil for their lamps? Out in the community. They had lamps and flasks—flasks that would be difficult to fill at the last minute, such as at midnight when the bridegroom finally came—flasks that were in their possession all along and could only be filled by connecting with others, working, serving, listening, interacting faithfully with others who were also waiting for the same bridegroom.

This really isn't very complicated. That very wise philosopher Charlie Brown once said, "Sometimes I lie awake at night and I ask, 'Where have I gone wrong?' and a voice says to me, 'This is going to take more than one night.'" This parable isn't like that. Remember: we are all lamps and we all have flasks. Lamps are for sharing light in the world—and flasks are what we do (with God's grace) to help make that light shine precisely when it's needed.

Some of this "flask filling" work involves self-care. A friend of mine, Anna Carter Florence, who teaches preaching at Columbia Seminary, uses a simple illustration in her class about what is needed to be light of the world. She brings in an oil lamp, the kind with a wick and real oil in the bottom, as a visual aid and lights the wick. The class watches it burn, but she only puts a small bit of oil in that lamp, so it burns for a few moments and then goes out. She asks the students: What happens when the oil runs out? Your light goes out. You have nothing to give, nothing to offer. The next question is true for her students and for us: Where do you find God each day? And as a child of God, where do you get the oil you need for your flask so you won't run dry?

You can't get flask oil at the last minute—like at midnight when the bridegroom comes unexpectedly. And honestly it's not something you can borrow from someone else. You can't borrow someone else's peace of mind or inner strength or passion for God's justice. It is something that comes from keeping our focus and from waiting intentionally—faithfully—joyfully—expectantly.

Today is Stewardship Sunday. Part of the stewardship process involves sharing pledge commitments for the coming year. In a real way, making a financial commitment to anything—to your family, a charity, the symphony, a veteran's

group, United Way or the Women's Shelter, or yes, to this church—is an act of filling up your flask. It shapes what you do tomorrow. No one pledges to something out of indifference, walking away from it with a shrug after you've committed your resources. No, it is now a part of you. It is the flask you carry—the priority you value. In this parable from Christ, it is how we stay awake now as we wait for the coming Bridegroom.

We cannot help waiting, but we can wait wisely or foolishly. We can wait and interact with others, stand beside others and advocate for others, so that our light shines for justice and inclusion and mercy—and so our conversations and actions with one another and our openness to Christ's generous grace keeps our flask full. Because all of us wait for an incredible banquet—a time of celebration, healing, new life, even eternal life. All of us wait now. May we do so as good stewards, as wise members of the bridal party, and as faithful children of the One who was, who is, and who is to come.

AMEN