

“In the Meantime”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, November 12, 2017

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Holy Scriptures: Matthew 25:1-13 (NRSV)

The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

[Jesus said,] “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this.

Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.

⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’

¹⁰ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.

¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’

¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

In the Meantime

Otherwise delayed.

Jesus promised He would return.

We know He is on the way; He must be stuck in traffic.

Best guess is His GPS is glowing red on the route from there to here;

maybe He has opted for the detour
along the Blue Ridge Parkway through the Smokies;

or He is o'er yonder,
wheels spinning in the red clay of Georgia's back roads.

We know He is on the way; obviously He is otherwise delayed.

It's the only explanation that makes sense, at least from a human perspective.

You know how it is,

when you are in a rush, a bit behind, 'cause if you're like me,
always trying to do more than is practical in the allotted amount of time,
and that will be the day you hit every red light,
find yourself behind the only soul in Atlanta
who isn't in a hurry...you know how it is.

So, too, does Jesus.

God came to earth in human form to point us the way to God.

God has already been here.

God in Christ will return to claim us and restore us.

So here we are, caught between the Already and the Not Yet.

In the Meantime

Some folks get impatient.

That is understandable.

Some folks predict gloom and doom.

That is not too surprising, considering the anxiety level of the age.

Some folks pretend to know the day and the time of the Day of the Lord.

That is ridiculous.

Dawn. Saturday, May 21, 2011.

Some were surprised to see the dawn of a new day,

for that was the date a radio preacher had predicted would be the Rapture.

On the eve of the predicted Rapture,

my brave hairstylist Tracey Howard was reflecting on Judgment Day.

Tracey came to her own conclusion:

she put me down for an appointment in a couple months hence
or else, she said, *"I'll just see you on the other side."*

That weekend on NPR's *"Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me,"* host Peter Sagal said,
*"This weekend it's the scheduled time for the Rapture,
according to a prominent religious leader.
So, if you find yourself listening to our show,
there are really just two possibilities.
Either none of us made the cut, or
...and I think this is more likely, this is Heaven."*

In the Meantime

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom of God.

The bridegroom is delayed.

Maybe he is caught in traffic; maybe he likes to make a grand entrance.

Ten bridesmaids go out to wait for him.

Five bridesmaids plan ahead, bring oil for their lamps; five risk not carrying any extra.

When he draws near, they all attempt to trim their lamps.

However, only those with oil can light the way.

The other five head back into town to get some oil.

While they are gone, the bridegroom returns.

The wedding feast begins, the doors are closed, and no one else is allowed in.

¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.'

¹² But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'

¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.'

While the bridegroom is delayed,

while the Christ is on the way,
we are called, commissioned and compelled to be totally present.

I wonder if Jesus is teaching us through this parable to be where our body is.

You see, my friends, Christ affirms that we are People of the Covenant.

The Lord shall be our Lord, and we shall be God's people.

This covenant is grounded in love.

God loves you, and wants to be in relationship with you.

God loves you unconditionally,

and as a sign and seal of such unconditional love,
God sent to Earth the only begotten Son, born of Mary in a manger.

God calls for you to return the allegiance with your life and love.

Our relationship with the holy is founded on trust, on faith.

We need not worry or be anxious about God's timing.

We need only be alert and watchful;

keep awake and grateful, and be totally present, here and now.

In the Meantime

What is the difference between bridesmaids with oil in their lamps, and those without?

What was the difference between Noah and the rest of civilization?

What is the difference between the two in the field grinding grain?

What is the difference between sheep and goats,

between those who heed God's Word and Will
and those who chose to ignore it?

Keep alert, watch, and practice the spiritual disciplines.

Jesus Christ did not say He was returning to the temple or church building

for those that are His.

He said He would return and come again

for those chosen and at work and play in their vocations.

Live daily into your calling to serve and sacrifice and support one another,

trusting in the Lord to lead you into each new day, and leave judgment to God.

Around these parts we like to say that Jesus teaches us how to fish for people.

However, He insists that He alone gets to clean the catch.

Although what I think he mostly does with the catch is release.

In the Meantime

The parable of the promised return of the Son of God speaks of a crisis situation.

Please, do not hear this as a dire warning nor as an empty threat.

He said to watch for the crisis, for the Day of the Lord, not to be afraid of it.

The Chinese written character that depicts Crisis

is the combined drawing of two signs: challenge and opportunity.

Each crisis that we encounter alone, afraid and isolated may make us feel

like we should freeze or fight or take flight.

Thanks to the Promise of God's love and presence

we are never alone, nor need we be afraid or in fear.

When we open ourselves to revel in the joy and hope that is found in Christ,

each crisis we face is both a challenge to be encountered
and an opportunity to live fully in the present,
to explore options for restoration.

This is a Word of Hope for us personally and communally;

God's gift of Jesus was sent for the whole world,
not to condemn the world but that we might be saved through Him,
that we might be redeemed through Him,
that we might be restored through Him.

In the Meantime

They say that a mother was seated on a bench in our church's Decatur Toy Park

when a small boy about five years old sat down near her.

He stared at what appeared to be a prized possession:

a Mickey Mouse watch.

"What a neat watch!" she said. "Does it tell you the time?"

"Of course not!" said the child. "You gotta look at it."

Look at what we have before us.

A community of faith. A covenant. A promise.

Jesus Christ promised to return, to fulfill the covenant, to complete the Day of the Lord,

to establish the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven,

We trust in His promise, so we wait with eager anticipation in the now.

A year, a decade, a century may seem like forever to us; to Him they are like a minute.

Time has meaning, depending on what meaning you ascribe to it.

Chronos time, linear time differs from *chairios* time.

God values relationships, which evolve and grow through experiences of *chairios*.

Chairios, the experience of the holy when linear time seems to stand still,

when relationships deepen, broaden,
expand, expound, resound with joy and meaning.

Chronos, or linear time, also has meaning

as our long-term commitments deepen over a span of time,
a span that arcs and bends toward devotion, loyalty, and steadfastness.

What matters when you're between the Already and the Not Yet?

Faithfulness. Trust. Being there.

Being present in the Now.

We await and are awake between the Already and the Not Yet.

So, we wait.

Hopefully.

Longingly.

Patiently.

And in the meantime, meanwhile, in the interim, in the interval,

for the moment, for the present, for the time being,
for now, we wait...in the Now.

Restoration happens now, in the now.

We are in the business of reclaiming our soul every day.

It is perfectly natural for our minds to get ahead of ourselves, or to dwell on the past.

How many of us are anxious for tomorrow because we wrestle with living today?

Please, resist allowing the future to overshadow the present or the process.

How many of us struggle to move into the brightness of today,

feeling challenged because of what we've done previously,
or had done to us, without our consent, against our will,
or maybe all of the above?

Please, resist allowing your past to overshadow the present or the process.

Coach Dan Quinn of the Atlanta Falcons has a clock on his desk.

Where there should be numbers on the face of the clock,

instead is the word NOW 12 times.

No matter what time it is, the time is always now.

Live in the NOW, with God and one another, between the Already and the Not Yet

In the Meantime

For the past several years Christian Church and United Church of Christ

clergy and laity have been working side by side in Ferguson, Missouri.

Good and faithful Christians have walked the streets and sat down

with young people and shopkeepers and police officers
to build community and address the current crisis there.

Our partners in Christ have chosen to see the crisis

as a challenge and opportunity for positive social change.

Teenagers who live in Ferguson raised questions

that haunt and hover over all the talk, protests and disruption, fires and anger.

Our friends Revs. Ray and Wendy Miles served a church there,

and were close to the situation.

They testify that young people asked representatives of the Church, in effect,

“You are here now. Where were you when our schools became overcrowded,

and our job applications ignored?”

You are here now. Where will you be when this fuss has died down,

and the next crisis erupts someplace else?”

Where were we?

Lord have mercy, we've erred and strayed like lost sheep.

Where will we be?

Spirit of the Living God, we're called to live out and live into your promise.

In the meantime, we can be in the Now.

Being in the now means that character matters.

Being in the now means being present and accountable to one another.

Being in the now means seeing the real needs of real people.

Being in the now means listening to heartfelt questions without offering pat answers.

Being in the now means raising the level of civility in our culture,

refusing to vote for or support pedophiles or abusers who run for office,
choosing to respect and recognize everyone as a child of God.

As the late Fred Craddock shared in this significant pulpit

when speaking with us about the Final Judgment:

*"God grades on a curve;
the only question in the final exam is how do you love your neighbor."*

In our church we are fully cognizant that the question is not,

"Who is your neighbor?" because we know who our neighbors are.

Yes, we know.

The question we ask one another is, "What does my neighbor need?"

Our neighbors need to live in a world that is safe.

We want a world where folks are not anxious or afraid to go out in public

for fear of their lives,
free to enjoy a concert, the town square, bike paths along city streets.

We want to go to church or temple or mosque without fearing for our lives.

We need to live fully in the now without fear of senseless violence;

Fear that someone has an automatic weapon.

Fear that innocents will be harmed because of another soul's
displaced anger or mental illness, despair,
utter frustration or unwillingness or
inability to express himself or herself
without resorting to violence and mean behavior.

Living in the now means we refuse to let evil set the tone or have the last word.

Living in the now means we speak up and step out.

Now is the time and place to act, to restore, to reconcile,

to invest ourselves wholly and completely and faithfully
in the realities of today with an eye on the next generation
and the blessed promise of tomorrow.

In the Meantime

Otherwise delayed.

Martin Luther was once asked

if he knew that Jesus was returning the next day,
what would he do today?

Martin Luther said, *"I'd plow a field."*

While Judgement Day may be otherwise delayed, we are otherwise engaged.

We've got fields to plow, relationships to deepen, love to share, a world to heal.

The Good News is that Jesus is already here, in you, in you, in you, in you.

Now.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!