

Sermon for November 9, 2014
Matthew

For many of us today's Gospel reading sounds old and very hard to relate to our modern day lives. As we talked about in the children's sermon for today; bridesmaids in Jesus' time were to shine light onto the bridegroom, not take care of the bride as they do in today's weddings.

Matthew's parable was written to a community that has come through persecutions and being driven out of the Temple because they kept their faith in Jesus Christ and confessed him as Lord and Savior. They are patiently waiting for his promised return that has been delayed longer than anyone of that time had expected. We see that in our reading from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians who thought that they had missed Jesus' promised return. Matthew's writing thirty years after Paul and we can imagine it's harder to keep the community vigilant in waiting for Jesus' return. Now fast forward to our day—some two thousand years later. How many of us are anxious because Jesus hasn't already come back?

The parable itself is uncomfortable to many of us because we can see ourselves as the foolish ones who didn't bring enough oil. But that seems a little unfair because all of the bridesmaids brought oil; all of the bridesmaids fell asleep and we don't get into the wedding feast because we didn't plan on the bridegroom being this late and no one would share with us?

Then there's the waiting and let's be honest the kind of waiting that Matthew wants us to do is hard. We're to wait for something that's way overdue, that we're not even sure will come in our life time and we're to be actively preparing for it while not exactly sure what we should be preparing for. It's not like we're waiting

for a baby. While waiting for the birth of a child we know what we need to take care of a baby and that the baby will be here in about nine months time so we know what to get and by when to have it!

And while we aren't always doing the type of waiting that Matthew wants us to do; we do know about waiting. Ask any child or even some of us grownups about how hard it is to wait for Christmas day. Every time I visit my family my mom would tell me to call her as soon as I got home; because she would be waiting to hear of my safe return. Or we wait for the call of that certain, special someone as we long to hear their voice and hear them tell us how much they love us. Yes, we know what it is to wait and we know how hard waiting can be. We know how anxious waiting can be.

So what are you waiting for? What are you looking forward to or what waiting has become difficult and anxiety ridden? Is it an upcoming wedding, the birth of a child or grandchild, test results from the doctor, results from the interview for a new job, whether or not you'll get into the school that you want, when will the sharp pain of loss finally ease, or when your relationship with a family member or friend will be ok again?

Yes, we know about waiting. It doesn't matter if we're waiting for good or bad; the in-between time is anxious and stressful. Will the baby be healthy, is this the right person, job or school for me, will the tests turn out alright? Throughout time waiting has been difficult. In today's parable Jesus himself is in an in-between time. The parable is set between his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his arrest, trial and crucifixion—and he knows that it's coming. But we find him

teaching the people, arguing with his opponents and instructing his disciples as he waits for the cross. Jesus knows how difficult waiting can be.

But how can we be actively preparing for something that we don't know when it will happen? While we wait for the final resurrection we have many opportunities to testify to Jesus' presence that is all around us. When we work for justice as Amos calls us to do in the first reading for today we testify to Jesus' presence. When we bear each others burdens and cares we testify to Jesus' presence. When we advocate for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, those in prison, or those without jobs or friends—we testify to Jesus' presence. When we try to make this world that God loves so much a better place in which to live—we testify to Jesus' presence.

This kind of waiting and preparation can be draining and exhausting work; it's hard to sustain on our own. It can be frustrating when we the outcome to our work isn't what we want or we can't even see it. We can get distracted by the myriad of obligations that already fill our lives. When this happens it's easy for us to relate to the foolish bridesmaids. But we have something those bridesmaids didn't—the church. Here is a place where we can find help and support in our waiting and as we try to live out our life as a Christian. Recall what Paul wrote to the Thessalonians whose waiting had become unbearable, "Therefore encourage one another with these words."

That is our role as the church even though we are filled with both wise and foolish we are to give encouragement to one another. We console the bereaved and those in pain. We celebrate the achievements and build up after the defeats.

We give hope when others have none. We give comfort when needed and courage when we are afraid. We help each other wait for the long and unexpectedly delayed bridegroom, prepare for the unknown and keep the faith when the world tells us it's not worth it. We encourage each other with the promises of Christ. And that's what it means to be the church, to come together every Sunday to help each other make it through another week by hearing and sharing those life giving promises of Christ.