

## **An Important Job to Do**

Rev. David Reynolds

Matthew 25: 1-13

Well, the bridegroom was taking awhile. I don't think it would be proper to say that he was late, or maybe even to use the word delayed, as it is translated here. Because they had a very different view and experience of time. They didn't have clocks or watches, of course, and time itself in the culture wasn't nearly as regimented and standardized as it is in our experience. You know that the standardization of time happened with the advent of the railroads. Before the railroads, a single state might have twenty different time zones! So, our regimented and standardized experience of time is really very recent in history. As Elton Richards once said in reference to this parable, the old song, "Get me to the Church on Time," didn't apply.

In Palestinian villages, weddings happened at night, sometimes earlier, sometimes later. Who knew exactly when. As I said, they didn't operate with "exactly." It would all begin whenever the bridegroom arrived at the bride's home to take her back to his home. But, it was at night, and it was dark, and when you're waiting awhile in the dark, and you've already been up and busy all day, you are apt to get sleepy. And so, they all did. As the parable says, "all of them became drowsy and slept." Now, remember, the bridesmaids had an important job to do. They weren't there just to be showpieces, although I'm sure there was probably some of that, just like today. But, they had an important job. It's safe to say that the wedding wouldn't take place without them. Their job was to light the way! They were to light and lead the way to this wedding. And once they arrived at the bridegroom's house, their lamps had to keep on burning to provide light for the feast itself. They had a job and it was an important one.

Well, I think Matthew intended a word of God for the church. Because the church was and is considered the "bride" of Christ. And if the church is Christ's bride, can't we be seen as the bridesmaids, whose job it is to escort and light the way for the church to "wed" so as to live in a unity with Christ's love for the world? We in the church have been given an important job! Because the wedding of Christ with his church is the Kingdom fully realized on earth! What a party that will be! What a feast of blessing for all. So, we have a job. We have a mission. We are both to begin to embody among ourselves and, as a body, to struggle in a conflict-ridden world, for the fruits of the Kingdom. The fruits of love, mercy, justice, kindness, reconciliation, peace-making, generosity. It's an important job! The Kingdom can't come without those works, because they themselves are the characteristics of it.

But, sometimes the night seems so long, doesn't it? Like forty years of wandering in the desert. Sometimes the days seem so long. But, still like the Hebrews with Joshua, even after entering this land promised to them, the call comes: "who will you serve?" The opportunities come each day, no matter how dry the desert seems and so we the bridesmaids have to be ready to light the way for the Kingdom of love and mercy and reconciliation. It's an important job. Well, as the story goes, half of the bridesmaids are ready to do their job and half are not, and so they miss the party! Now remember, this is not a story about some final judgment. It's a parable of the Kingdom and how it comes among us.

So, five of the bridesmaids took flasks of oil along with their lamps, but the other five, the foolish ones, took no extra oil. They just took the lamps with what oil was already in them. It's almost as if the lamp, to them, was just part of their wedding attire, like it was just all about looking good in their dresses. You have the dress and you have a lamp. Now, they might have said, "well, looking good is important, I mean it's just out of respect for the bride and groom that I want to look my best." But, the bride and groom don't need their respect; they need them to do their job! They need them to light the way!

But, you remember, when their true situation finally dawns on these others, it's too late. They're off trying to get *prepared* to do their job, but when they finally *are* prepared, the opportunity has passed. As the parable says, "the door is shut." And when they come saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." the bridegroom's reply is "I do not know you." Now, remember this is not a story about final judgment. It's about how life is, and how the Kingdom is. See, to do the *work* of the Kingdom is to know and be known by Christ. And the opportunities come every day and to so miss them is to miss knowing and being known by Christ.

We know how that is. It's all about living in hope and expectancy isn't it?! We have a choice! We can either remember who our risen and living Lord is, and trust how it is that he shows up in the most unlikely people and places, in what may seem at times the darkest of nights. We can remember that and be ready to join in the work of the Kingdom, be ready to know him and be known by him, or, we can live our lives on autopilot, as just one damn thing after another, not expecting any of these people we deal with, or any of the situations we're in to suddenly be filled with Christ. And says this parable, that is to miss the chance to be known by Christ, it is to miss the chance to enter into Christ's on-going wedding feast.

Tony Campolo tells the story of walking down Chestnut Street in downtown Philadelphia one day when he noticed a bum walking toward him. "He was covered with dirt and soot from head to toe. There was filthy stuff caked on his skin. But the most noticeable thing about him was his beard. It hung down almost to his waist and there was rotted food stuck in it. The man was holding a cup of McDonald's coffee and the lip of the cup was already smudged from his dirty mouth. As he staggered toward(s) Campolo, he seemed to be staring into his cup of coffee. Then suddenly he looked up and yelled, "Hey mister! Ya want some of my coffee?" Campolo recalls that he really didn't, especially looking at this man's beard, and he said "no thanks," but had only taken a step past the man when he thought better. And, so he turned back and said, "second thought, sure, I'll take a sip of your coffee." And as he handed the cup back to the man, he said, "You're being generous, aren't you, giving away your coffee? "Why are you being so generous, today?" And "the old derelict looked straight into (his) eyes and said, "Well, the coffee is especially delicious today, and I figure if God gives you something good, you ought to share it with people!"

And Campolo says, at that point he thought to himself, "Oh man. He has really set me up. This is going to cost me five dollars." So, he asked him, "I suppose there's something I can do for you in return isn't there?" And the bum answered, "Yeah! You can give me a hug!" Truth be told, Campolo would have preferred the five dollars!" But, the bum put his arms around him and Campolo put his arms around the bum. And then suddenly he realized something. This bum wasn't going to let him go! People were passing on the sidewalk staring and Campolo was embarrassed. But, then little by little, his embarrassment passed and it came to him that this was Christ who had his arms around him, Christ who he was hugging. And he'd almost missed it.

Friends, the choir sang, *It is Enough* this morning. The love of God that we know in Christ's dying to show us ourselves clearly, and to show us himself always among us is certainly enough. That is salvation. That is the divine healing that changes our hearts and our lives together. It is enough, to change the way we see this earth, as a sacred place, paradise filled with God. It is enough, on this day in our Stewardship campaign when we focus on the stewardship of time; it is enough to change the way we see time, not as something to be protected and held and regulated, but as a gift filled with continuous opportunities to know and be known by Christ. It is enough, to change the way we see each other, not as friend or enemy, not as rich or poor, or this or that, whatever labels we apply, but as Christ come to us in a person we can cherish and value and serve. It is enough for us to live in hope and expectancy of the Kingdom God is always bringing. It is enough, for us as his people to light the way.  
Amen.