

A sermon preached at St. George's Anglican Church Calgary, by the Rev. Clara King, on Sunday November 12, 2017.

Proper 32 – Year A

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

2,000 years is a long time. We've created for ourselves a vivid imagination about what things were like 2,000 years ago; but still, it's a long, long time. Many things have changed. And along the way, certain messages fade out of focus, while other messages seem to sharpen and come to the forefront.

In today's gospel, we have an example of a parable told for a very specific time and a very specific context – a people living through a time of struggle for whom the meaning of this parable of the 10 bridesmaids would be profoundly clear, and profoundly challenging. For them, Jesus was not mincing words. But we can only understand that when we understand their context.

The context was that first generation of Christians evangelized by Peter and the disciples and Paul. Following Jesus' resurrection, the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to preach that Jesus was the Messiah who had been raised, in whom all people could find new life – and that he would come again to bring justice and peace to all the world. And the people came, seeking healing, seeking forgiveness, and seeking new life and a new way of living. And they came seeking also the coming of peace and justice on earth – and the final overthrow of the Roman oppression.

And for those early Christians – for the disciples too – they were certain it wouldn't take long for Jesus to return; it was going to happen very soon; in fact, it was likely to be any day now – maybe even this week – like on Thursday. And they prayed together every day, and held all things in common, and didn't get married or have children, and gave everything to the poor, because Jesus was going to come, any day now.

And then Thursday came and went, but they awoke the next day, filled with hopeful confidence that they were one day closer to that day when they'd see him again.

But steadily the weeks passed, and the months, and the years. And in our reading from 1 Thessalonians today, we hear Paul speaking to a community who had been waiting for a long time, like 20 years, and Jesus hadn't yet come. And now, the elder members of the community were dying off, having waited faithfully for years, and the whole community was starting to wonder: will it ever happen? Are we waiting in vain? Should we still hope?

It was for them that Jesus told the parable of the 10 bridesmaids, which goes like this: A whole community is waiting for the coming of the bridegroom so that the wedding feast can begin. Of the 10 bridesmaids sent to keep a lookout for the bridegroom, five assume that he will come swiftly, and so they are prepared only for a short wait – but the wait is long. The other five have been wise enough not to assume how long the wait would be, so they had prepared themselves to be patient, knowing that the bridegroom will certainly come in the end, whether swiftly or slowly. Finally the bridegroom comes, and the ones who were prepared for a long wait are ready to greet him with joy, and welcome him home.

It was a parable told for a community who would be tired out with waiting and losing hope. Jesus told this parable knowing that the early fire of their faith would waver and grow dim as the excitement passed, and the long hard struggle against Roman occupation continued, and the years came and went. And so he told them this parable to encourage them to be patient, and keep hope. But this wasn't the only parable he told for his people who would grow tired of waiting. He told two others, found immediately after our parable today: the parable of the talents which we'll read next Sunday, and the parable of the sheep and the goats, which we'll read on the Sunday following. Together, these three parables – the whole of the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, add up to Jesus' message to those who are waiting.

The parable of the 10 bridesmaids says, "do not lose hope no matter how long the wait might be – for it will be long. Be ready, always". The parable of the talents says, "and do not be idle while you're waiting!". And the parable of the sheep and the goats answers the question, "and what shall we be busy with?" – "whatever you do for the least of these brothers and sisters," Jesus says, "you do it for me."

This is the message Jesus left his followers to strengthen them in their waiting: Prepare for a long wait, and in the meantime, be active: serve the poor, the forgotten and the outcast. And Jesus left this message, knowing how hard it is to wait and hope for a long time, and not give up.

2,000 years later, we are still waiting. We are still hoping. We have not given up. And meanwhile we've been active in service of this world that Jesus loved and died to save, the world for which he was resurrected. It matters what we do in the meantime, Jesus tells us; it matters how you live this life now, even while you wait and hope for a future of justice and peace.

It is important what we do while we wait. Here at St. George's, we are waiting: we are waiting for our future home to be built – and just like those early Christians, our wait is longer than we'd hoped. And just like those early Christians, we don't know when that day will come. But just like them, we're called not just to lie in wait for that day when we have our new home and then we can be a real church again – *we're called to be active*; we are called to live now as the people of God.

And I'm proud of us that that is exactly what we're doing. Remember this time last year: the truth is we were struggling. We were struggling financially, and we were struggling to find a sense of vision and purpose to bring us together. Now look at where we are: remember all the things we've done this year. God has helped us find our way onto a good path, a path of healing, a path of reconciliation, a path of new outreach ministries, and a path of growth. So now, we will walk this path that God has set in front of us.

The Wardens have signed a contract with Brian Way to continue our journey of healing from the abuse in our past. This coming Tuesday at Parish Council, we're hearing presentations from two of our leadership groups with specific proposals for how to enhance our welcome for newcomers, and how to enhance our focus on discipleship. Just on Friday, our new website was launched, as part of a new focus on inviting newcomers to try us out. And there's still the Caring group to hear from, about how we better support and accompany one another in the challenges we face in life. And meanwhile, we continue to work with the refugee families whom God has introduced to us, to help welcome them to Canada.

We are waiting, but we're not idle. God is giving us opportunities as a congregation; God is giving each one of us opportunities in our lives – to live out the kingdom of God now; to live into the future we long for *now*.

And so we wait, steadfast in hope, active in faith, and called to work now to make the world a better place, each of us, one step at a time.

May God bless us in our waiting, and bless us in our journey. **Amen.**