

The Pace of the People of God

Matthew 25:1-13

I want to begin today by saying thank you to everyone in this congregation. Most of you know that I was originally scheduled to preach last Sunday. But on Sunday, October 30th, I received news that my friend, pastor, and mentor Kyle Lake was killed in a tragic accident. Kyle was the pastor of University Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, the church I attended through most of college. Kyle was standing in the baptistery that morning preparing to baptize someone, when there was an accident with a microphone that caused Kyle to be electrocuted. Needless to say I didn't feel much like preaching last Sunday, so thank you, Charlie, for giving me another week to prepare. I can't say with complete certainty that I'm done grieving yet, but I want all of you to know that all of your support of me through kind words, cards, phone calls, e-mails, and prayers has been felt. Preparing for today still wasn't particularly easy. Preaching is an intimate act and this is a time when it's hard for me to share myself with others. Preparing myself to preach requires a great deal of introspection, a looking into my soul to see what words God may want me to offer all of you. Because of my grief, looking inward is the last thing I want to do these days. But I am here today, having looked at the text and looked at my own heart, taking what has blessed me from the words of Jesus and offering them to you as a blessing. I wouldn't be able to do this without all of the support members of this congregation have offered me in the last two weeks. So let's turn to the teachings of Jesus and see how we might be blessed today.

Our gospel passage finds us among ten bridesmaids as they wait for the arrival of the bridegroom. Just a quick side note here, but I want you to know that my texts for

preaching last month and today were chosen strictly by the dates and passages of the lectionary. Charlie and I sat down in early September and picked out these dates by simply looking at a calendar and choosing two Sundays, one in early October because Charlie needed someone to preach in his place while he was in traveling in Jordan, and today because I need to preach here twice to fulfill the requirements of one of my seminary classes. Depending on your view of God, it's either divine providence or bizarre coincidence that I, a newlywed of just over three months, ended up with a parable about a wedding banquet last month and today have a parable about bridesmaids waiting for a bridegroom. If you've ever questioned whether or not God has a sense of humor, I offer you the lectionary and my scheduled days to preach as evidence. But I digress.

Again, our text today finds us among ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom. This is the last in a string of exhortations by Jesus to watchful for the messiah. Jesus tells his audience that the signs of the messiah's return are like a fig tree in full bloom, letting all know what season it is. Jesus also says that the return of the messiah will be like the days of Noah, in which everyone spends his or her time eating and drinking as the rain begins to fall around him or her, until suddenly they are swept away by a great flood. The return of the messiah will also be like a thief in the night, Jesus tells us, because if any person knew the time the thief would be coming, then their doors would be locked and they wouldn't be caught with their guard down. Finally, Jesus tells us that blessed is the servant whom the master finds at work upon his return. When the return of the master is delayed, the wicked slaves begin to mistreat each other and eat

and drink with drunkards. The master returns at an unexpected hour and gets rid of all the wicked slaves. Jesus, it would seem, is really trying to drive a point home here.

So Jesus tells us the story of the bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom. As I can attest, a wedding is an exciting time that is also filled with much waiting around. As Jana and I concluded our rehearsal dinner, I kissed her goodbye and knew that the next time I saw her would be as she walked toward me in the church. I went home to the apartment that Jana and I now share and began counting the minutes until 1:00 the next day. The clock could not move fast enough. I set the alarm nice and early, fearful I would oversleep, but I woke up on my own before the alarm and the thoughts of all that would happen that day filled my head and made it impossible to go back to sleep. I watched TV, paced my apartment and double and triple checked that I had everything I needed to take to the church with me that day. Wedding license, check. Wedding bands, check. Suitcase packed for honeymoon, check. Finally, the time to go to the church came but once I got there I again spent most of my time waiting. I sat in my assigned room with my groomsmen and waited. The groomsmen could wander the halls but for fear of seeing Jana, I only got to leave the room to take a few pictures. Finally it was time to leave the room and yet then I had to wait with the ministers for my assigned time to enter the sanctuary. Finally I entered the sanctuary, only to have to wait at the front for Jana to join me there. But after all the waiting Jana did indeed join me in the front of the church and the ceremony and celebration began. All told, I was only apart from her for about 15 hours, but it seemed like an eternity.

So I can only imagine what it was like for the bridesmaids eagerly waiting for the bridegroom. The bridegroom is delayed. We're not told how long he's delayed, but we

know it was long enough that the bridesmaids lost interest and fell asleep. This text would speak volumes to the early church and I think it speaks even louder to us today. Remember that the first Christians thought that Christ's return would be any day. Most of the apostle Paul's early writings advocated this belief. Paul's early letters tell the churches to remain as they are because Christ's return is imminent. If you are single, why bother to marry? If you are married, stay married. If you are a slave, stay a slave, because soon Christ will return. At the time the gospel of Matthew begins to circulate, there is much doubt about Christ's return. If there was doubt about Christ's return for the first few generations of Christians, how much more comfortable is the church today in ignoring the possibility of Christ's return? We have 2000+ years of history on our side telling us that odds are against the imminent return of Christ. So we get comfortable, assuring ourselves that there is always tomorrow. We fall asleep, much like the bridesmaids did. There is always tomorrow to do something for the Kingdom of God. There is always tomorrow to change the way we live. There is always tomorrow to fully devote oneself to living as disciples of Jesus. The words of Jesus in this parable tell us otherwise. There will come a day when there is no tomorrow.

But let's be honest, I can tell myself that there will come a day that there is no tomorrow. I can tell myself to live a life that is always prepared for the return of the messiah. But I don't know how much it would change the way I live, mainly because I can't see a way to change what I'm already doing. I can't even think of what else to tell this church to do. I'm lucky enough to serve in a church that I fully believe is trying to be prepared for the return of the messiah. So if I stand up here and tell you to live like there's no tomorrow, what should we do? Do we sell all we own, cancel the life

insurance policies, quit our jobs and wait for the return of Jesus? I don't think we do that either. Honestly I think we continue doing many of the same things we've been doing. I think we continue trying to reach out to the neighborhood around us. I think we continue trying to make Emory Church a safe place to explore the radical message of Jesus. I think we continue to teach our children and youth what it means to be a disciple of Christ. I think we continue to model the behavior of a disciple in our own lives. I think we continue to reach out to those in need, seeking to offer them a bit of redemption in this life.

But that can be just as tricky. We can reach out to the neighborhood, but there is no guarantee that they will welcome us and join us in following Jesus. We can explore what it means to follow Jesus, yet still have no definitive answers about how to be the body of Christ in Decatur Georgia, in 2005. We can teach our children and youth how to be disciples of Christ, and yet they still might not express their faith in ways we expected them to. We can help those in need, but there is always someone in need no matter how much help we provide. It can be extremely discouraging to do all we can to follow Jesus and still not see results.

I think this discouragement is a product of the fast pace of our society. Nothing in our society takes time anymore. We have fast food and microwave popcorn. We demand faster and faster computers and internet connections every year. We want instant access to all our friends and family via cell phone calls and text messages. With air travel we can be half way around the world in less than a day. I think our world of instant access and instant gratification has seeped into our faith as well. Whether we admit it or not, we want instant access to our God and instant results in our efforts of

faith. After all, the best selling Christian book of the 21st Century so far tells us that all we need is 40 days to find God's purpose for our life. While I'm not criticizing the book or those who have been helped by the book, I tend to agree with what Richard Foster, another noted Christian author, says about those who take a short-term view of the life of faith. We cannot accomplish in 40 days what has always taken 40 years. Foster is advocating a radical idea. That we understand that as Christians, we must live on God's time instead of our time.

Our parable offers us a good example of taking a long-term view. We know that ten bridesmaids were waiting. Waiting in excited expectation of the coming of the bridegroom and the wedding celebration that would follow. As the waiting begins there is no difference between the wise bridesmaids and the foolish bridesmaids. There is still no difference as the delay begins. There is no difference as the delay grows so long that everyone falls asleep. But suddenly, unexpectedly, the bridegroom arrives and it is time for the celebration to begin. The five wise bridesmaids take out their extra oil and trim their lamps. The foolish bridesmaids have no oil and so they are caught unprepared. The foolish bridesmaids never imagined that the wait would be so long. Caught without oil, their lack of diligence is exposed. They are turned away by the bridegroom and not allowed to join the celebration.

The problem for the foolish bridesmaids was that the bridegroom is delayed and takes more time to arrive than expected. But the church, the bride of Christ, must remember that Christ, our groom, has no concept of time. God does not share our human, linear concept of time. God's concept of time can be found summed up in a statement made to Moses before the Exodus. Moses asks, "Who shall I say has sent

me?” God famously replies, “I AM that I AM.” There’s a lot of theology wrapped up in those two words, “I AM.” For God, there is no past, there is no future, there is only now. We must continue to do our faithful work in the now of God’s time even though it seems like an eternity in this world’s linear time.

When I think of faithful, patient work, I think of *The Shawshank Redemption*. I’m guessing most of you have seen this movie or at least know of it. Made in 1994, it tells the story of Andy Dufresne, a man wrongly convicted of murdering his wife and her lover. Early in his stay there, Andy approaches Red, an inmate skilled at procuring items for prisoners, about getting him a rock hammer. It seems that when he was a free man Andy was an amateur geologist, and to occupy his time here in prison he’d like to be one again. Red worries that Andy might use the hammer to dig his way out of prison. Andy laughs and says that when Red sees the hammer he’ll know that such an idea is ludicrous. Sure enough the hammer is no bigger than the size of an average person’s hand. Soon after he gets his hammer, we see Andy use it to carve his name in the wall. Fast-forward much later in the film, and you find that Andy is missing from the morning prison count. The warden tears down a poster from the wall of Andy’s cell, only to discover the tunnel Andy dug through the thick walls of the prison. The tunnel gave him access to a drainage pipe running under the prison’s perimeter fences. Andy crawled through that pipe and found freedom on the other side. It turns out that Andy’s favorite pastime at night was hiding underneath his poster digging his tunnel. During the day he carried the remains of the wall out into the prison yard and dumped them, just a handful or two every day. Who knows how many times Andy felt like what he was doing was pointless? Who knows how many times Andy was tempted to give up?

Andy's friend Red sums up Andy's diligence in his own evaluation of Andy's escape. "I remember thinking it would take a man six hundred years to tunnel through the wall with that hammer. Andy did it in less than twenty." Twenty years can seem like an eternity in our fast moving society, but Andy understood that he had his entire life to meet his goal. It is my challenge for myself and for Emory church that we would have faith like Andy Dufresne. That we would keep digging when we only move a handful of the problem at a time. That we would keep reaching out to this community even when our efforts do not see an immediate reward. That we would continue to explore the radical nature of following Jesus even when the same questions come to mind again and again. That we would model for our children the life of faith even when it is met with unexpected results. That we would help those in need even when the amount of people in need of help seems overwhelming. That when our linear time finally joins God and Jesus in their Eternal present, that Jesus would find us as faithful bridesmaids, lamps filled with oil, doing the work of faith even when there seems to be no end in sight.

To the glory of God, Amen.