

The Bethel Pulpit

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BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Title: 50/50

At first glance, we might think that today's text from Matthew gives us a 50/50 chance of joining Jesus when he comes again as he has promised. It seems to boil down to how prepared we are. The wise ones will bring plenty of oil, whatever that is, and the foolish ones, who do everything the wise ones do like fall asleep and bring their lamps, forget to bring an extra supply of oil and have to run off and get some. While they are away replenishing their supply of oil, the bridegroom came, and when they got back with the fresh supply, it was too late; the door was closed.

This story in Matthew is confusing and hard to understand. On top of that, it really makes us uncomfortable. We would all like to think that we would be included with the wise ones, but I know myself too well. There are some people like the person who has an office next to mine that are always incredible prepared way in advance. They have plenty of oil all the time. They bring more food, more material than an hour can hold in a presentation, and they often operate with the motto, "If I am not 15 minutes early, I am late." I am daily reminded that these people exist; but it's not me. Thankfully, I don't think that's the point of this parable. So what is it? How can we make any sense of this for our lives today?

We have to let other passages for Matthew help us interpret today's gospel reading. For starter, what has Jesus been up to? Well he has come to Jerusalem; Palm Sunday has already happened and Jesus knowingly is headed to the cross. He came in grace and mercy. We are walking with him now to the cross. All along the way, he has been about the work of accepting and loving those, who like us, were sinful and unclean. He came to heal a broken world, not slam shut the door to the kingdom. He came to reveal the width and depth of his grace and mercy. And Jesus has been waiting for just the right moment to give up his life. Jesus shows patience and control in his waiting.

Danish photographer Peter Funch waited 10 years to complete his work. He got up every morning and got himself over to Grand Central Station in New York City. There he took up the same position everyday taking photos of the same commuters. His waiting allowed him to catch the same people 2 or 3 times, sometimes years apart. When I read the story and saw the pictures, I wondered, "How did he do all that waiting for so many years just to tell the story he imagined. How do you do with waiting?"

Many of us don't do so well. I have observed over my life time how attitudes toward waiting have shifted. I think there are lots of changes that have produced a decreased tolerance to waiting within us as a society. I used to be willing to wait an hour for a table in my favorite restaurant when I was with my boys when they were as young as 4 and 7. In my purse, I carried "Table Talk" a deck of cards sized box with great conversation starters. Each card presented a fascinating fact followed by a thought provoking question. There wasn't a right or wrong answer. We all were entertained while we waited for a table, to order, for the food to come. We had a plan for waiting. Let's face it waiting is hard. In my experience, the concept of delayed gratification has grown old and meaningless for many of us. We choose not to wait if possible. We wait to get pregnant, to have children. We wait for them to grow up and be independent, to get a job, to go to college, and then we wait for them to come back, to have grandchildren, to come and visit, and then we secretly wait for them to leave so our lives will get back to normal. We are always in between the time we are presently are and the time we wish to be. (REPEAT!) There has been a lot of waiting around Bethel. Waiting for the Transition Task Force to do its work. Waiting to put together the call committee. We live in a "results now world." And we have not gotten any better at waiting; we may have become less tolerant of waiting. Matthew reminds us that in all of our waiting, we are not alone. Jesus waited to die; he waited three days to rise from the dead; he waited for his disciples to learn the

way of discipleship. Our following Jesus shows us how to wait. We can look at how he waited and learn how to best use our in-between time. One of the key things Jesus did was to bear the burdens of others. We have people here at Bethel who regularly make visits to the homes of those too frail to get here to worship. We have an active homeless ministry here where some of the most at risk come for a place to be warm and receive a warm meal. We have an active and joyful Sunday school where our children come to learn about the goodness and love of God. We have choirs who sing praises to God as we worship. We have 8 new Teams gaining momentum to walk with Jesus into the future. There are so many ways to wait while we are in the in-between time. It could be that we get so involved in the mission of God that our involvement makes the burden of waiting easier. Serving others, spending time building relationships with others are the best ways I know to wait. We are blessed to be a blessing.

There will be times when we grow weary. It's hard for us to sustain productive waiting. We grow weary of change, weary of not changing; we grow weary working for justice; we become distracted by our overly busy lives that just love to keep us from what we need the most. On any given day, I can be foolish or wise. Alone, our weariness can be overwhelming, but together, living as the body of Christ, living in Jesus' promise to be working with us and for us, we can find the support and stamina we need to wait. We can rely on the strength of each other. When we are at our best as the church, we can wait for almost anything, even Jesus' return.