



Faith Requires Patience

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 25:1-14

July 25, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I didn't think through the emotional risks of reading a parable about a wedding gone wrong just a few weeks before my own daughter gets married. We have been looking forward to her wedding for just over a year now and it is just weeks away.

Last year, just after Sarah and Ryan were engaged, they came to visit us. It was a wonderful visit. During that time, she said, "Hey Dad, listen to this band." She pulled up some video on her laptop of a particular band. I said, "Oh, they sound good." She said, "I'm glad you think so. We want to hire them for our reception. You know, a band is so much more engaging than a deejay." I said, "I agree." "Oh, good," she said. "We can't decide if we want to add the horn section. It's an additional charge." I said, "Well, the horns sound great, Sarah." "Oh, good," she said.

A bit later, I said, "So, here's what we are going to do. Your mother and I will give you X amount of money for the wedding. We want you to spend that any way you want. You don't have to run anything by us. It is yours. And if there is any left over after the wedding, you can keep the difference."

The next day, I asked, "So, what did you decide about the horn section?" She said, "Oh, Dad, we are getting a deejay."

She is busy planning the perfect wedding—in the sense that such things can be planned. I've been to a lot of weddings and one of the things I know is that they don't always go perfectly. I've been to a wedding where one of the groomsmen left his shoes at the rental shop. Everyone came down the aisle in those shoes that look like motor oil—except him. He wore sandals. I've been to a wedding where the father escorted the bride down the aisle and as he turned to sit down, he stepped on her veil which

was draped across the floor and pulled her veil right off her head. I've also witnessed a father of the bride who got to the front of the sanctuary and his pants fell down—straight to the floor. He just stood there in powder-blue boxer shorts.

One of my mentors married a couple and when they got to the vows and he said, "Repeat after me, I Michael, take you, Nancy, to be my wife."

The groom said, "I, Michael, take you, Nancy..." But he wasn't sure how to proceed since the bride's name was Sally. Not everything goes perfectly at a wedding.

My daughter is busy planning the perfect wedding, so I have not shared these experiences with her. But one thing I know: As long as Ryan is there and she is there, it will be perfect. Even if some things go wrong, it will still be perfect. And I have purchased a new belt to wear.

In this story of Jesus, the groom was late. Very late. What happened in those days is the groom traveled to another village to secure his bride—probably in an arranged marriage. The bridesmaids were actually from the groom's home village and they would wait at the edge of town for the groom to return. They would wait for love to arrive. When the happy couple returned, the bridesmaids would light their lamps and dance back to the groom's home where a party like no other party would commence.

But in Jesus' story, the groom was late. Really late. Late enough that it became obvious that some of the bridesmaids decided that he was never coming back. The wedding was a lie. They had spent all this time living toward a day when the love they had heard about would come to them. They had spent their life living toward a day that would never come. I say they stopped believing that the bridegroom would

return because some of them didn't bring any oil.

Through the years interpreters have wondered just what does this oil symbolize? Some have said that the oil was love or faith or some such quality. But if I understand the text, it was hope... at least in this sense. The only reason you carry oil with you is if you still believe that some day—some long-awaited promised day—you will have to light a lamp. You carry oil today because you will need to light the lamp and join the party in some tomorrow. If you believe that that day is coming, it changes how you live today. And if you don't believe that day is coming, it shapes how you live today as well. You either carry oil or you don't. Am I making sense?

Of course, like all of Jesus' stories, this one is not about a wedding, but about the promised day of God. And if anything is late, the promised day of God surely seems to be late. We can't avoid the promises of the faith. They are dramatic and they are fantastic and they are uncompromising.

The faith asserts that the day will come when justice will roll down like waters because we will finally decide that fairness to everyone is something we can no longer live without.

And the faith asserts that swords will be beaten into plowshares because it will some day make more sense to us to feed one another than to kill one another.

And the faith asserts that the poor will have good things because some day we will claim that while we don't all have to have the same, the blessings of life being claimed by only a few will finally seem as sinful to us as it is.

And the day will come when every burden and every dashed dream and every broken heart and every human injury is mended and made whole and redeemed.

But that day is delayed. And even with every effort of people of good will through the generations, that day remains a long and distant dream. It has been long enough in coming that Jesus knows we might begin to doubt that it will ever come.

The heart of this assertion of God's promised day is this question: Does God really have an ultimate purpose for us? For the world? Are we living toward a real purpose or is life simply an accident and we

are on our own?

If you believe that God's promised day is our ultimate purpose, then you live toward it every day. But Jesus says that it is going to require patience.

Like many of you, this week I have been reliving some of my visits with Dr. Bob Meneilly. I'm mindful that most of the members of this congregation never knew him as pastor, but those of you who did, know that he was a pastor like none other.

I called him a couple years ago to wish him a happy anniversary. He stumbled a bit and said, "I'm sorry, Tom, but today's not my anniversary. I said, "Sure it is." Silence. "Bob, you retired as pastor of Village 25 years ago today," He said, "What makes you think I would want to know that? I'm getting old." I said, "Bob, you've aged, but you never get old."

We talked often. And we never talked when he didn't want to know how you are. Dr. Bob was one who carried the oil of hope every day. He did it when he walked the streets of this neighborhood, building this church from nothing into one of the largest congregations in the nation.

He carried the oil of hope when he walked these streets in a fight for social justice and to fight the housing restrictions regarding race in our community.

He carried the oil of hope when he spoke out for inclusion regarding the LGBTQ community.

He carried the oil of hope when he spoke grace to those who had known heartbreak or shame in their personal lives.

But to borrow from our text, he sometimes felt the bridegroom was delayed. We were talking this past year about the nation's struggle with racism and he said, "It's disappointing that the church is facing some of the same things the church faced so many years ago. It seems like we would have gotten further along," he said. "I so hoped we would be further along."

You know, in some ways we have come so far. In some ways, there is a kindness and a justice and a wisdom that was only dreamed of in days gone by. But in other ways, we still battle the same things we always have. And I think that means that carrying the oil of hope matters every day. We don't give up.

Because when we carry the oil of hope, we do

the good that is ours to do. It requires patience, but when we trust that love is coming—that the love that defines the world is coming—it gives us the courage to do the good that is ours to do *today*. And no matter how small that might seem, it matters.

In the 1980s, I heard about a kid named Ryan White. He lived in Kokomo, Indiana, and contracted AIDS. He was ostracized for his illness and greatly feared. He became known in Kokomo because the school district would not allow him to attend school because of his illness. He became a national story.

What I didn't know was a moment in his life that occurred in church on Easter Sunday. He said that at his church, the pastor would step to the front pews, shake a few hands and then say, "The peace of the risen Christ be with you." And then everyone would turn and shake hands, greeting one another in the same fashion. "The peace of the risen Christ be with you."

At this moment, Ryan said he put his hand out to find only empty air. He said, "Everyone's hands were going every which way in other directions, but no one, absolutely no one, wanted to wish me peace on Easter." He said that his family filed out of worship in silence and then it got worse. Their car died just as they pulled onto the road. They got out of the car and watched church family after church family drive past them—no one stopping to help.

Finally, a stranger stopped and asked if they needed a ride. They said, "We should tell you who we are first. We are the family of Ryan White and this is Ryan and he's the one dying of AIDS." He said, "Okay. Where can I drive you?"

The moments of carrying oil happen just like that. You can't anticipate them. You just know that each day is shaped by the faith that either our actions reflect a trust that love is coming or our actions betray a fear that it is not.

My friend and preacher, Michael Lindvall, said of that moment in the Kokomo church all those years ago, "One thing mattered on that Easter morning. The sermon didn't much matter. It didn't matter how the choir sounded. God wasn't counting the lilies... In the moral urgency of the moment, the one thing that mattered was that Ryan White be offered the peace of Christ."¹

It's hard to imagine treating someone who is ill that way. We are better. But we are not home. We live in an in-between time. We are still living toward a day where every action is defined by love. And as Dr. Bob said to me, "You would think that we would be further along." But we are where we are and the world needs you to carry the oil of hope. Don't lose hope. Don't ever lose hope. Carry the oil of hope—for that is the surest way to join the party that God has in mind.

1 This is shared in a paper Michael Lindvall presented to the Moveable Feast in 2011.