

One of the significant problems of Christian theology is the problem of the Parousia or second coming, which has been delayed. It was thus in Matthew's time, so he told this story.

Matthew 25:1-13

¹“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight, there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

As I teach in my Bible studies, Matthew is a hard-core gospel. It seems what we do matters more than what we say. What we do is a direct revelation of our faith. What we do reveals what we believe and who we are. Sometimes, Matthew feels so hardcore that the gospel of grace is missing. That's why I had so much trouble with this message.

I just couldn't get started. The reason is simple. I don't like it.

I just don't like this parable. It feels so unforgiving, unlike Jesus, who told the story of the lost sheep, coin, or prodigal son. In those stories, the kingdom is like someone with 100 sheep, and one wanders off, so the shepherd goes out looking for the lost sheep and brings the sheep home. Or where the woman loses one of her ten coins, searches diligently until she finds it, and then celebrates with her friends.

In one of the ultimate Jesus stories, the story of the lost sons, the younger son says give me my share of the inheritance. He receives it, immediately takes it off and wastes it, runs out of money and friends, and is reduced to slopping hogs. He decides to return to his father and say, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Please take me in as one of your servants.” When the father sees him coming, he will have none of it, and before the son can spew out his speech, the father welcomes the younger son home with the party of the century. It's a real wang dang doodle.

Meanwhile, the older brother won't come to this party; he is still angry at what his brother did. The father goes out to him and implores him to come in. It is the story of a loving father who won't give up on his sons and won't give up on us.

I like these stories better. Much better.

So, I did a rewrite of the story. The story is fine until the five bridesmaids run out of oil. And there, I would begin my changes. I would have it so the other five lent them some of their oil, and when the bridegroom came, all could get to the party, the kingdom. I don't want to have anyone left in the outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth. I would have the story's lesson that we should share with those who don't have enough; that seems the Jesus thing to do, for everything you have comes from God.

That is a good lesson and a good message, just not the message of this scripture. It's not the story Matthew's congregation needed to hear.

Matthew tells this story to a generation of Christians in his church who are beginning to weaken in their faith. They expected Jesus to return before then, and Jesus hasn't returned. So, as Lauren Winner says, the parable we have is not the one I would prefer. There is no fairy tale ending where everyone lives happily ever after. My story focuses on ten young women in a bridal party awaiting the groom's arrival so they all may proceed to the party, banquet, which is an image for the kingdom. Five don't bring enough oil, and the other five do not share but send them out to buy more oil. This is part of the over-the-top nature of the story. Where at midnight are they going to find oil? And though they do, they arrive too late to get into the party.

We don't know much about the wedding ceremonies in Jesus' day; most information comes from an earlier or later time, but this must be accurate enough for people to identify with the process and processional.

People were giving up on the return of Jesus, and for us we know it hasn't happened in a literal way yet, and many wonder or doubt that it ever will.

On the other hand, as I said last week, some expect the end to come in their generation, and it has always been this way. As a pastor in Pacific Missouri, I heard a story from a hundred years earlier about the pastor who identified the day and time of Jesus' return and had his people gather on the bluff that overlooked the town. Well, Jesus didn't come back then, and the pastor said he miscalculated and gave another time. Some of his followers gathered again with no return and no end of history, and after that, the group and pastor faded into obscurity.

But there are many like that in every generation. When I was just getting started, there was the “Left Behind” series that spoke of the coming of the Lord at the end of the age. If we listen carefully, many of our Christian siblings expect the return soon. And that is why many use this passage as an attempt to scare people into heaven. But like weddings, hope, not fear, is at the heart of the gospel. And over time, fear cannot sustain faith.

Many others have given up most hope of Jesus's return to set everything right. Many see it as symbolic. However you see it, I think we need to maintain that sense of hopeful expectation that God will restore creation and God’s intended purposes for creation will be accomplished. I believe it will happen, but I have no idea what that will be like. I know this answer to the prayer “thy kingdom come on earth” is not something we envision in our lifetimes.

I also get it because that vision of the return of Jesus is only one possible interpretation. My way of looking at it is Jesus returns again and again in each of those holy and sacred moments in our lives. As I have told you, the birth of my grandson twenty-one years ago was just such a moment. It turned my life of faith around and has continued to as I have watched him and Ada grow. The latest one was at my installation as moderator of the Presbytery. Betsy asked me the constitutional questions and then placed the moderator's stole and cross on me. I felt the presence of Jesus. I was overwhelmed by the sacredness of that moment. It was so powerful. It was a moment of being born again; I felt it in the depths of my soul. Those kinds of moments empower me and give me the desire to be faithful. That doesn't mean I have given up on a final resolution to history when God restores everything and everyone, and the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. I don't worry, although it probably won't happen in my lifetime. I am sure that Jesus has come to me and will come again.

Unlike me, the people in Matthew's church worried because Jesus hadn't returned and set everything right. They began to drift away and weaken in their faith. Matthew drew on this parable to encourage them to hang in there and be faithful in the living of each day. They took it literally when Jesus said, “I'll be back,” like Arnold in *The Terminator*. But this story is to drive home the point: “13 Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” So, like the scouts, we must be prepared. We are to live with the desire to be ready for that moment.

It is like one of my favorite songs by Rod Stewart and Jeff Beck: *People Get Ready There's a Train a-comin'*. We must prepare now for that gospel train and live a life of preparedness. When the train has left the station, it is too late to prepare.

Matthew wants his people not to give up hope because Jesus didn't return as expected. He says we must prepare for his coming and live out that faith in the world where Jesus hasn't returned in a literal way.

For me, it is a message that every moment is a moment that can be filled with the expectation of the presence of Christ.

This message tells us that we must be prepared by living lives worthy of Jesus. Preparation is the only real difference between the wise and foolish ones. It's like the old song about the wise man who built his house upon the rock and the foolish one who built his on the sand, and the storm came and washed the house on the sand away.

I also think of the three little pigs with their houses of straw, sticks and bricks; the brick house was the only one that withstood the wolf's attack.

Matthew wanted his congregation to live lives prepared to meet the Lord on his return. So, what does it mean to prepare for us in a world where Jesus hasn't made a literal return? How do we prepare? It's not sitting around waiting and doing nothing. How do we do it? Do we live lives worthy of Jesus? I want to suggest two ways.

Now, preachers are told never to be the hero of their own stories, but I can share one way that works for me while still knowing I don't have it down like I would like to; I stumble all the time.

I read and study the gospels and all the scripture regularly to get a picture of Jesus and use that picture to interpret all of the scripture. This might mean joining a bible study or talking with others to develop an in-depth sense of Jesus.

Another way based on what we learn from worship, prayer, and study is action.

Later in this chapter, Jesus tells in detail how we treat those whom we encounter and how we care for and meet is the path to meeting him. Jesus meets us in the needs of others. He comes to us repeatedly in the face, heart, and needs of those we meet. This is a bit ironic because we watch for Jesus and prepare to meet him by not watching for him. Rather, we focus on the needs of others, and there he is, coming to us again.

So, we must prepare for Jesus to come again and again in our devotional lives. We can also prepare to meet him in the face of others. Jesus returns to our lives of faith as we learn about him and as we meet him in the presence of others.

We can pray, “Come, Lord Jesus,” thinking of God’s final restoration of creation, but we can live “Come Lord Jesus,” as we worship, study, pray, and serve others.