Sermon: Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 28, Year A
Matthew 25:1–13
By the Rev. Alfredo Feregrino
St. Luke's ~ San Lucas Episcopal Church
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Many years ago, when my children were little, we had a big cat named Ozie who lived in our neighborhood and came to visit us all the time. I loved Ozie, and every time he came to our house, I would give him a cup of milk. I also liked having him around because he was very good at scaring away the rats. And as you know, rats can be a big problem in any neighborhood.

At the same time, in our home, we had two beautiful guinea pigs, Cinnamon and Sherlock, and we did not want them to become Ozie's lunch. You know what I mean! So, every time Ozie showed up at our home, we would shout, "*Hey, Ozie is here*! Make sure the doors are closed!" And as a family, we always had to be on constant alert, making sure that the front and back doors of our house were closed. I loved having Ozie around, and I always looked forward to his visits, but we also needed to be prepared and on constant alert for the unexpected.

And I am telling you this story as I reflect on today's Gospel, where we hear a somewhat confusing parable about ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom. Five were wise, and five were foolish. When the bridegroom finally arrived at midnight, five of them were not prepared. They had run out of oil for their lamps, and while they went to buy more, they missed the wedding banquet.

And Jesus concludes this parable with these words: *"Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."*

Some biblical commentaries explain that this parable is an allegory, a story that uses characters and images to communicate a hidden and deeper meaning. So, Matthew, the Gospel writer, uses this parable to remind us of the importance of being prepared for the coming of Christ, despite the apparent delay.

You know, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the earliest Christians expected Jesus to return within their lifetime.

By the year 50 CE, just about twenty years after Jesus' death, some of the early Christians in the communities founded by the Apostle Paul were already becoming restless. They had expected Christ to return during their lifetime. They believed that Christ would come again, that God would bring history to its fulfillment, and that a new creation would emerge. They lived with a profound sense of expectation. But as the years passed and Jesus had not returned in the way they expected, some members of these early Christian communities began to lose hope, others became discouraged, and perhaps some even began to question whether the promises of Jesus would ever be fulfilled. This delay created a problem for Christian theology almost from the beginning.

So, this parable served as a reminder to Matthew's early Christian community to remain faithful, alert, and prepared, even when the anticipated event seemed to be delayed. And I think this is important because, in many ways, we find ourselves in a similar situation today. We continue to proclaim in our Nicene Creed that Christ will come again in glory. We continue to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." And yet, when we look around our world, we continue to see suffering, violence, injustice, poverty, and division.

So, we may ask ourselves: Where is this Kingdom that Jesus promised? When will God's promises finally be fulfilled? And how long are we supposed to wait?

These are not new questions. As you know, these are questions that Christians have been asking for almost two thousand years.

And perhaps the parable of the ten bridesmaids is not so much about predicting when Jesus will return, or when he will come again, but about how we live while we wait.

And waiting is something that all of us have experienced in our lives. Right? We wait for good news from a doctor, for a loved one to come home, or for a difficult situation to change. We wait for a better country, a better government, and a better world. And sometimes, we wait for so long that we begin to wonder whether anything will ever change. Does this sound familiar?

But there is a difference between simply waiting for something to happen and living with hope and expectation.

The spiritual writer Richard Rohr speaks about what he calls a liminal space. He describes this as the place in our lives where we find ourselves between an old comfort zone and a new possibility. A place in our lives when what is familiar has disappeared, but something new has not yet emerged or become a reality.

And I think this is a beautiful way to understand our Christian experience of waiting, because we live between what God has already revealed to us in Jesus Christ and what God has not yet brought to fulfillment.

In theological language, we call this the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of God's Kingdom, between what God has already begun in our world through Jesus Christ and what we are still waiting to see fully realized.

The Kingdom of God is already among us because of what Jesus taught us through his life, death, and resurrection. But God's Kingdom is not yet fully realized in our world. We experience God's love in our lives, but we also see hatred around us. We experience forgiveness and reconciliation, but we still live in a world filled with conflict and division. We see moments of justice and peace, but we also know that many people continue to suffer. We know that there is still so much work to be done. So, we live in this in-between space, between promise and fulfillment, between hope and uncertainty, between what is and what is yet to come. We live in this liminal space.

And I wonder whether this is precisely where God is inviting us to live our faith more deeply.

Because, as Richard Rohr reminds us, if we are not willing to live with ambiguity, uncertainty, and the discomfort of not knowing, we will try to find ways to escape from this space.

Yes, waiting is not easy. We live in a society where we no longer know how to wait, or perhaps we simply do not want to wait. We live on the fast track, in a culture where instant gratification has become the norm. But life does not always work that way. Sometimes, God invites us to wait, not because God is absent, but because something new may be emerging in the midst of our waiting.

And I think this is one of the most important messages of today's Gospel. Waiting is not necessarily a state of inaction. Waiting can be a spiritual practice in itself, a practice that invites us to deepen our relationship with God, to pay attention to the world around us, and to recognize the possibilities of God's Kingdom unfolding in our midst.

So, let me ask you a question.

"I wonder, are we so focused on what we hope God will do tomorrow that we forget to recognize God's presence in our lives today?"

You know, this parable is deeply connected to what theologians call eschatology, which is the Christian understanding of God's ultimate plan for creation, especially the return of Christ and the fulfillment of God's promise to bring the world to a time when love, justice, and peace will be fully realized.

So, within this frame of mind, when we think about the second coming of Christ, we may imagine an event that will happen sometime in the distant future, an event that will suddenly transform the world. But our tradition invites us to live with the hope that God will ultimately bring creation to its fulfillment. And I believe that our eschatological hope is not simply about waiting for God to do something at the end of history. It is also about recognizing what God is already doing in the world today.

Remember some of Jesus' parables about the seeds? The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, something small, almost invisible, that grows into something much greater than we could ever imagine. Or remember the parable of the sower, where the seeds are dispersed generously, but their growth depends on the kind of soil in which they fall.

And I wonder whether our waiting is also about preparing the soil for the new possibilities of God's Kingdom, a Kingdom of justice, peace, compassion, and love. A Kingdom that transcends space and time, but also breaking into our lives here and now.

And this is where our expectation becomes something very practical, because waiting for the Kingdom of God does not mean sitting around doing nothing. It means becoming co-creators with God in bringing healing, reconciliation, and new life into the world.

Here at St. Luke's ~ San Lucas, every time we welcome someone, care for someone who is struggling, or stand with those who are vulnerable, we are participating in the new possibilities of God's Kingdom. These may seem like small things. But remember the mustard seed. The Kingdom of God often begins in ways that we might otherwise overlook. And perhaps this is why Jesus tells us to keep awake.

Later in this same chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells another parable, known as The Sheep and the Goats, where he identifies himself with those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, sick, and imprisoned. And he asks: Did you feed me when I was hungry? Did you give me something to drink when I was thirsty? Did you welcome me when I was a stranger? Did you visit me when I was sick or in prison?

In other words, the Christ whom we may be waiting for is also the Christ who is already present among us, in the faces of those who need our love and compassion. He is present in the people we encounter every day.

So perhaps the question is not simply when Christ will return or when Christ will come again, but whether we are ready to recognize him when he comes to meet us in our daily lives, here and now.

So, as we continue our journey of faith, I invite you to wait with hope and expectation, to be patient but also ready to act out of love. Because hope is not just about believing that things will get better someday. It is about trusting that God is already working in our world and inviting us to participate in that work by bringing love, justice, and peace to others.

So, going back to the beginning of my sermon, every time Ozie the cat showed up at our house, we would shout, "*Hey, Ozie is here*! Make sure the doors are closed!" Yes, we never knew exactly when Ozie would arrive, but we knew we needed to be ready.

And perhaps our waiting for Christ is something like that. We do not know the day or the hour, but we are invited to live with our hearts open, our lamps burning, and our eyes attentive to God's presence among us.

Because the Christ we are waiting for is also the Christ who comes to meet us every day, often in the most unexpected ways.

AMEN

A Note from the Preacher

Because sermons are meant to be preached and therefore prepared with emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., they are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.