

Year A, Proper 27

November 12, 2017

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and Matthew 25:1-13

Extra Oil for the Wait

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this.” The “then” refers to when Jesus returns. The parable describes the disposition of Jesus-believing people waiting for the big return on the moment he walks through the door, so to speak? The text assumes he will return.

1 Thessalonians also seems to support his real, physical, in the sky and in history return. Paul even presents a schematic for the sequence of events on that eventful day. He says, “The dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.”

We really are waiting for Jesus who really is returning and knowing this comforts us and orients us toward preparing for his homecoming.

This coming event will be quite dramatic. Usually we think of Jesus as meek and mild, non-invasive and invitational and he is, but he does have a commanding voice, particularly when he returns in fulfillment of his promise and as the full revelation of God’s love and forgiveness for all people. There is nothing wrong with being forceful and commanding when it is in the service of love and forgiveness.

Paul says, “For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven.” As I watch the news and hear what’s going on in the world, I take comfort in the literalness of Paul’s words. Jesus’ future coming gives me hope, energizes me toward faithful living and allows me to endure what I see everywhere without succumbing to despair.

Paul doesn’t want us uninformed. Apparently there was a lot of misinformation going around that Paul wanted to combat. Paul presents a positive statement on what he and those around him believe. “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who died.” The only qualification on who he brings with him is having died. Does this mean “through Jesus, God will bring with him” those who died in 928 B.C., all people of a Hindu faith, those who espouse no faith at all, the babies who died at birth and never had a chance to choose? I think so and I find it fully consistent with a God who created and loved all his creation. Do you see how Jesus does all the heavy lifting here? Everyone gets brought into the ark. None are left behind. How is this possible? It is possible through Jesus who shows us the character of God!

God has been like Jesus all along. Our problem has been that we have seen God as like us, and have largely written our scriptures through that lens when all along he has been different than we thought. Even the Old Testament gives us peeks at God's true character but they are like Oregon Sun-breaks in winter—fleeting and quickly obscured by grey clouds. Once we learn to look for them and appreciate them when they come we can enjoy winter knowing the sun is up there and will return.

So this brings us round to the one who will return and again the imagery features darkness and light. It seems the kingdom of heaven is an attitude of waiting for the return of the key figure to a celebration that will fully begin upon his return. It's not that he won't return, that's assured, but the issue is when. Already he has been delayed. Some say he is 2000 years overdue.

How do we wait without losing heart and what does waiting look like? Could it be that this condition of waiting with expectation no matter how long it takes is what the kingdom is like?

Maybe the kingdom of heaven is the awareness that the game is over and everybody wins. Jesus-followers know this now and live in view of it. Life isn't a contest to see who God loves the most because God loves us all and the world is in the painful and difficult process of discovering that too. Nor is life a contest to see who gets to heaven and who goes to that other place. The other place does not exist and what we think of as heaven is simply the ongoing awareness that we are all loved. In fact, this love holds us in being. We have ongoing life, resurrected life, because God's love holds us in being.

When we love someone we don't want them to disappear. That's the way God is toward all humans created in his image. The end of time in history is when we all see this in its physical expression when Jesus returns. It's not a time of punishment and retribution, it's a time of revelation and grace; a time to look forward to and receive energy from, not a time to dread and use to intimidate others.

Our story tells us that five of the bridesmaids were foolish and five were wise. The foolish didn't take enough oil. I guess they didn't expect to have to wait so long. All ten got drowsy and went to sleep with their lamps burning. They were ready for his coming and lived and slept in anticipation of it. No doubt it kept them living in hope, their spirits buoyed, their attitude open and forward leaning. All good!

“But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’”

I don't know how long it would takes for lamps to use up their oil. I picture all ten bridesmaids getting up and seeing that their lamps had burned out, pouring more oil in them so they would hold a flame. Those who didn't have extra oil would just be burning the wick and their lights would quickly go out again.

“The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But 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.’” I’ve always wondered why if they were so wise they were so selfish. Maybe they weren’t so wise after all.

Where do you go at midnight to buy lamp oil? If they have to have lit lamps at the bridegroom’s return they are in trouble. But nowhere does it say the bridegroom will throw them out unless their lamp is lit. They assume their entry will be forbidden without a lit lamp and go off to buy more oil. They don’t trust in the mercy and forgiveness of the bridegroom. Maybe that’s why the story calls them foolish. If they had believed in his generosity and forgiveness rather than panicking about their own insufficiency they would have gone in with the rest and not excluded themselves. They would have gone out to meet him.

It’s when we give up on God’s grace and mercy that we do things that get us in trouble. This is when we get ahead of God and mess up big time. Some things, like our own growth in patience and trust, just take time. Maybe the wise bridesmaids weren’t so wise when they advised the foolish to go looking for oil at midnight. Maybe even they had trouble believing in grace and forgiveness. Parables are stories meant to prod and intrigue us into new ways of thinking. If that’s the case, this parable is doing its job.

Maybe keeping awake has more to do with staying aware of God’s love and forgiveness for us all no matter how long it takes for him to return. Maybe it’s living in a state of grace, dependent on God’s mercy, that saves the world. Maybe this is the kind of living that gives us extra oil and makes us wise.