

February 12, 2023 Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Matthew 25:1-13

"Gerunds of the Church: Celebrating"

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I grew up on the North Shore of Long Island. There were two basic ways people earned their living. They either taught at the university or commuted into Manhattan every day. For the commuters there were two options as to how to accomplish the journey. The first was to brave the Long Island expressway and spend two hours sitting in traffic. The second was to take the Long Island Railroad and spend two hours sitting on the train. Either of those modes of transportation ran the risk of delays, endless delays, and waiting. And remember, this was in the days before cell phones and laptops so no one was being productive or entertained while they waited. One time a truck filled with glass jars of mayonnaise overturned on the expressway. If I am not mistaken people may still be sitting in traffic as the clean-up for that mess continues. This was a culture that understood what it meant to wait, and sometimes, wait with no idea of when the waiting would be over.

This morning's text from the gospel of Matthew is a story about waiting. The ten bridesmaids are waiting for the bridegroom and the wedding feast to begin. Wedding feasts in the Bible are a symbol for the kingdom of heaven. We learn that five of the bridesmaids brought extra oil for their lamps and five just have the lamps with whatever oil is within them. The wait for the bridegroom was clearly very long. All of the excitement for the impending party eventually wanes as the wait goes on and on. In the end the boredom of the delay overtakes

them, and they all fall asleep. When the bridegroom finally shows up at midnight there is much scurrying as they all arise for the party. But only five of the bridesmaids have enough oil to continue on to the celebration. The five others are left to go scrounging for more oil and end up missing all of the fun. All ten of them had invitations to the party, to the kingdom of heaven, but only five had the oil necessary to finally make their way to the festivities.

So what does the oil represent? Some have suggested the oil represents good works. But all the bridesmaids are invited to the party so it does not feel as if they needed to earn their way into the party. And, lest we forget, all of the bridesmaids fell asleep so it was not as if five were busy doing God's work while the other five did nothing.

What separates the bridesmaids is that five are ready to celebrate absolutely any time, this very moment, or five hours later, or five days later, or five years later. The other five are only prepared for a celebration if it happens at the time they deem appropriate. The five wise bridesmaids have hope and faith in the arrival of the party no matter when it occurs. No matter what they know a celebration is coming. Delay and change in circumstance do not lessen their trust in its existence and their preparation for its arrival.

Today is the fourth sermon in the series "The Gerunds of the Church." We have previously discussed how to be the church we need to be inviting, forgiving, transforming, and the final gerund is celebrating. When we seek to be the church of Jesus Christ that means we are resurrection people. We believe that God's love has defeated every brokenness and limitation to be found in this world, including death. We believe God's kingdom

is surely on the way. This reality is a call for unbridled, joyful celebration. We should be drinking from a tap of euphoria in every moment of our existence.

But there is a second reality before us, God's victory is not always easy to see. We still live with the bumps and bruises of our sins and shortcomings; and with the bumps and bruises life lays upon us that are completely beyond our control. Suffering and death are still ever-present realities which will not be contravened on our side of existence.

However, we know that one day God's victory over all these things will be writ large in every corner of existence. One day there will be no more earthquakes. One day there will be no more shootings. One day there will be no more cancer. And scripture tells us it will be soon. But in the lines of a mother anxious about her endangered child speaking to the archbishop in the movie Romero, "how soon is soon?"

I do not blame us for being frustrated that the great celebration of God's victory has been delayed. Every day we are reminded that we are mired in the imperfections of ourselves and this world. It is not easy to keep trusting in the promise of the age to come when all we can see most of the time is this current age and its share of disappointments, heartbreak, and tragedy. How can we stand poised for the celebration to come when the wait seems absolutely endless? How long can we wait and how should we wait?

Now is when we circle back to my Long Island commuters from the beginning of the sermon. I do not know if this is still continuing because my Long Island days were a fair number of decades ago. But back in the day, there was a remarkable tradition on one of the rail lines heading out of Manhattan to

the Island every Friday evening. First a little background information. With all of the hecticness of folks finishing their work weeks, Friday evenings were infamous for train delays. You never quite knew when you would finally be arriving home and beginning your weekend. It was not unusual for people to be particularly testy as those Friday delays piled up.

Except for one group of people who would gather in the last car of one particular train every Friday afternoon. Each of them would arrive with something beyond their briefcase. Someone would bring a bottle of wine to share. Someone else might show up with some deviled eggs. Yet another person would have a portable radio. These folks did not wallow in the frustration of the endless delays to their weekend. They declared that their weekend was beginning now, regardless of whether they were trapped on a commuter train or not. They got the celebration started in the midst of the delay.

This is who the church is called to be. We are living in this time in between Christ's resurrection, God's victory over sin and death for all of us, and the visible, tangible reality of that victory in our midst. We could choose to live in frustration over the delay and be unprepared for the victory party to come. Or we could begin the celebration right now. We could claim the joy that is to be found in the promise of what is to come and live accordingly.

I do not think we need a drumroll to know the choice we must make. So what does it mean to begin the celebration of God's victory right now? It means that even as we live with the painful realities of the limitations of this world we are never without a word of praise to our God in Jesus Christ, who sacrificed everything to lead us beyond all of it. We are

called to see what the world will be when God is finished perfecting it. It means that although we may be inclined to be frustrated by each other's imperfections we are called to see each other for who we will be when God is finished perfecting us. It means when it may seem hopeless to continue seeking to house and feed and educate everyone, we are called to trust that God is at work in our efforts and leading us to a world of justice. It means when we may be tempted to be weighed down by disappointment in ourselves and our personal failings, we are called to see ourselves as we will be when God has transformed us.

Every time we gather together we are claimed by our God as the body of Christ. And Christ has been resurrected. So every time we gather together we are called to celebrate the resurrection. We are called to find joy in times of difficulty. We are called to find joy in times of sadness. We are called to find joy in times of fear.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition believes that every time they gather for worship that the angels descend from heaven to throw a party in their midst. We too are called to be celebrating each and every time we gather for worship, for fellowship, for education, for mission.

Let us keep our lamps full of oil and our hearts full of hope. Let us put our trust in the promise we have received. Let us be about celebrating.

Pass the deviled eggs.

Thanks be to God. Amen.