

“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (Matt 25:13) As we approach the end of the year Jesus’ words about the final judgment become more and more explicit. We will have a small margin for error.

The parable of the 10 bridesmaids is a case in point. Ten 10 bridesmaids are awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom who is late. Their lamps are burning as they wait and they fall asleep. When the bridegroom arrives the lamps need more oil to keep burning but only five of the bridesmaids thought to bring an extra flask of oil. The bridesmaids who were prepared go with the bridegroom into the wedding banquet but the five bridesmaids who had not brought an extra flask have to scurry off to a dealer to buy more oil but by the time they come back the doors are shut against them. How difficult this parable is to hear when we live in an age without accountability! We want the sensible bridesmaids to share, we want the bridegroom to reconsider shutting them out, and we certainly don’t want this parable to apply to us.

The meaning of the parable is a bit tricky since Jesus’ words were “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (Matt 25:13) In fact all of the bridesmaids had fallen asleep so we wonder why these were the last words. The issue is obviously not falling asleep. The real issue is preparedness but that is still not a preparedness without sleep. No one can live on a hair-trigger without respite. So the good news is that even as we wait for Jesus we can get a good night’s sleep.

Matthew was writing his gospel for a church that like many churches at that time was expecting Jesus’ second coming to be sooner rather than later. He was trying to encourage his congregation remain faithful even in the face of uncertainty which if it didn’t include persecution from the civic authorities was certainly experiencing suspicion if not downright rejection from the traditional Jewish communities of which many of the church members had been a part.

2000 years later most of us have stopped expecting Jesus imminent return – regardless of our feelings about our current political circumstances.

How do we keep the faith, how do we continue to hope in a time of uncertainty? That’s not as hard as it sounds. Well, it’s not hard to hear the message, but it is hard to do. Jesus’ message comes through loud and clear in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1-12) which we heard just last week. We are to care for those whom God has blessed: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for Jesus’ sake. The simplest way to do this is to err on the side of generosity. When people say they are hungry, feed them. When they need a leg up, give them a boost. When they are alone, befriend them. When they say they are hurting, listen. When they say they are afraid, protect them. When they are happy, rejoice with them. These actions make Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves, (Matt 22:39) real. After all our response is exactly what we would hope for ourselves in similar circumstances.

Generosity is the oil that we need to keep in our flasks. Generosity teaches us to rely on God’s abundance, it has nothing to do with calculated risk, with the attitude of scarcity that is an unfortunate component of our culture, inherited from our “Puritan work ethic” and

embedded in many of our laws. This is not to throw the baby out with the bathwater but always to remember that God's ways are not our ways and we are challenged to live into those ways. Generosity is not always our first response, and we may find it easier to be generous in some ways than in others. Nevertheless generosity is what prepares the groundwork for God's Spirit to work and to keep working within us. Our reward for trusting in God's abundance shows up in the gifts of the Spirit. Those gifts are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Gal 5:22-23 NRS) These are the fruits that will keep us awake, keep us faithful with our proverbial lamps burning, until he comes again.

Amen.