P24A 2026 Matthew 25:1-13

Many of you know there have been some changes to my home zoo this year; two deaths and one adoption, and I'm still adjusting. At eleven years old, Otto, the dog of blessed memory, had proven himself trustworthy to have the run of the whole house, whether I was home or not, whereas Angus, who is not quite eleven months old, has so far proven that he can't be trusted anywhere, under any circumstances, ever. Yet even Otto had one bad habit that he never broke: any time I would leave him home alone, he would eat the cats' food. I know it was him because the cats would always leave a little until the next time I fed them, but if I left Otto for any amount of time, I'd come home to completely empty bowls. He never did it when I was there, only when he knew I wouldn't be there to catch him, when I couldn't *prove* it was him; he'd leave an entire bowl of his own food and eat every last crumb of theirs. We would hope that our relationship with God is more enlightened than my dog's relationship with me, but Jesus is not so sure. When the gospels envision our behavior in Jesus' absence, Jesus' confidence in us is not high.

We are three weeks from the end of the liturgical year and just a couple chapters from the end of Matthew's gospel. Today and in the next two weeks, the lectionary assigns us the entirety of chapter 25, which includes three stories that imagine the end of times and the return of the Son of Man: first, the ten bridesmaids with their oil lamps, next week, the three slaves left to manage the master's talents, and on Christ the King Sunday, the sheep and goats before the throne of judgment. We'll look at each story in detail each week, but we should think of these stories together as a whole, related in that they all explore the same themes of judgment and Jesus' return. These are the last parables that Jesus tells before we hear about the plot to kill him; Jesus knows that he is about to die, rise, and return to the Father; he knows that one day in the future he will return in glory; and he knows that his disciples will need some encouragement to live faithfully until he comes back.

There is a sense of urgency and vigilance in these stories. Jesus' contemporaries expected him to return right away; remember when he ascended, the disciples stood looking up into heaven, as if they could wait right there until he came back down. The early believers all thought that Jesus would return with their lifetimes; it's part of why the Thessalonians despair—thinking that those who died while they were awaiting Jesus' return were somehow lost to God. By the time Matthew wrote his gospel, decades after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the hope of Jesus' immediate return had lost some of its urgency. 2000 years later, we still confess that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ *will come again*...but most of us are still saving for rainy days and retirement, so we're probably not expecting him to come again tomorrow. Yet Jesus tells us to be ready.

Jesus' parables are generally not easy allegories, but this one even less so. Ten women wait for a bridegroom to come start a wedding banquet. The bridegroom is so late that all ten fall asleep. At midnight, the bridegroom finally shows up, but since he took so long, half of the

bridesmaids' lamps are running out of oil. They ask for help, but the other five refuse to give it: we won't have enough if we share! And they send the five who need oil out into the night to buy more, which they do, but while they're away shopping, they miss the bridegroom and their chance to get into the wedding. When they come back, he won't let them in.

Let's look at the problems in this story: The difference between the wise and foolish bridesmaids was not that five were prepared and five were unprepared, but that five were reasonably prepared and five were over-prepared. Anywhere else in the gospels, those over-prepared bridesmaids who refused to share would have been called *greedy,* not *wise.* This scene sounds strangely similar to Jesus feeding the multitude, when the hour is late and the disciples want to send the crowds away to buy their own provisions, but Jesus says, *you give them something to eat.* Not here! Here the bridesmaids are on their own. Yet they keep trying: somewhere they find someone willing to sell them lamp oil in the middle of the night. But when they get back, the bridegroom still won't let them in. Somehow Matthew's gospel went from *Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you*...to *the door was shut* and *truly, I tell you, I do not know you.* Finally, Jesus supplies a moral to the story: *Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.* We have to assume that's good advice, since Jesus is the one who's giving it, but it doesn't match what happened in the parable: All ten of the bridesmaids fell asleep; none of them kept awake.

It's a safe guess that the bridegroom arriving for the wedding banquet is supposed to be Jesus returning, but beyond that, it's hard to know what to do with this parable. What in our lives of faith would be the equivalent of bringing not just a full lamp but extra oil…and if we did, why wouldn't we share it…and if we didn't, aren't we justified by grace through faith and not by our own works, anyway? Or is trying to buy ourselves oil at the last minute the work that will not save us?

This parable may give us more questions than answers, but here's what we do know: we are called to live as Christ taught us *now,* not to wait until we think we're a little closer to his return. And not just because we know neither the day nor the hour that Jesus is coming, and we don't want to be caught unprepared. We're called to Christlike living because doing God's will on earth as it is in heaven is how the kingdom comes here among us. We're called to Christlike living now, because the people around us need us to love like Christ, now. We don't need to worry about the day or the hour if we're living our baptismal calling every day, letting our light so shine before others. We might get tired of doing the work of discipleship, but Jesus urges us to stay awake, because whether he comes or we go, none of us know how much time we have. When Jesus does come, whenever he comes, may he find us doing what we have been called to do all along.