

## For What Are We Ready?

The Love that is God gathers us together for a time of reflection on this twenty-fourth of twenty-six Sundays in the long, green growing season of ordinary time on land which has lived in relationship with many peoples across millennia. During this season, we often hear parables from Jesus – multi-layered stories he seemed to trust would hold a meaningful lesson for anyone who heard them. As we enter into today’s parable for a time of wondering (For what are we ready?), let’s begin with prayer:

God of all, may the posture of each of our spirits be open as we welcome your Holy Loving Spirit to move within and among us. Amen.

Friends, I have never been fond of the parable of the ten wedding attendants. As I go about my daily living, often fully engaged with one person or task right up until engaging with the next person or task, being and feeling well-prepared and ready has rarely been my strongest suit. I joke in all honesty that I tend to be two to five minutes late for most of life, with arriving to our worship space by 9:30am being my consistent exception to that. So whether a parochial grade school student in daily Bible Study class or a forty-one-year-old pastor preparing a sermon, I have never relished Jesus calling me to task for behavior around which I already feel internal stress most of my waking hours. Nonetheless, I trust that this parable holds a lesson for each of us today. So let’s dive into wondering about preparedness and readiness, even attentiveness.

We can begin by understanding the cultural context the ten wedding attendants shared regardless of their levels of personal wisdom and foolishness. In Jesus’ time and space, on the day of a wedding, the wedding party (that is, the bridesmaids and groomsmen) would wait in the vicinity of the home of the bride’s parents.

When the time for the wedding celebration came, the groom and his attendants would arrive in that location to take the woman and her attendants to his parents' home for the celebration. Jesus likened the realm of God's love (the kin-dom of heaven) not to a great celebratory wedding feast but to a group of attendants preparing to meet the bridal party and the path of preparedness that leads to experiencing the celebration.

The ending of the parable feels abrupt and harsh. The five attendants whom Jesus called wise had brought with them extra oil for their lamps to accommodate a late arrival of the groom and his attendants and seamlessly accompanied the bride and groom to the celebration. Meanwhile, the five attendants whom Jesus called foolish realized mid-evening that they were ill-prepared and started scrambling around to trouble-shoot, missing out on both the journey to the wedding feast and the celebration itself. At the end of the parable, the doorkeeper denies entrance to the five who arrive late. Since they did not actually serve their function of accompanying the bride and groom to the celebration, they logically appeared to the doorkeeper as imposters posing as attendants. They had failed in their responsibility and experienced the natural consequence.

I find that we do well to acknowledge our actual guilt when we fail to pull through on a responsibility we have taken on. That's different than being shamed for who we are. I would say that the words "foolish" and "wise" are a bit shaming by Jesus in this story. But they did fail in their responsibility.

Jesus punctuates the parable with these words, *"So stay awake, for you don't know the day or the hour."*

Jesus invites us to hold a posture of attentive awareness as we move through the days of our lives – knowing the next day, hour or even moment is never guaranteed to us. We say that often, but how do we act upon the knowledge?

I am reminded of favorite words by nineteenth century Swiss philosopher Henri-Frédéric Amiel who wrote, *“Life is short. We don’t have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind.”*

*“We don’t have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us”* – I love that. It keeps me going day to day in my callings as mother, pastor, family member and friend.

Some of us were raised in theological contexts in which the concept of the realm of heaven was envisioned as only otherworldly and outside of our human lives – something that came as an unmerited reward after making it through a human lifetime. I see from where we constructed that concept of heaven as an afterlife. Hebrew and Christian scriptures include various narratives of prophetic figures and Jesus rising mysteriously into the sky and vanishing from sight. Jesus speaks in the gospel of John about longing to join his Father God in heaven, and the author of Revelation offers fantastic imaginings about end times.

Alongside any afterlife we may imagine and long for, I love how Jesus considers the kin-dom of heaven to be the journey and not the destination. I think that, if we’re honest with ourselves, we recognize that most of the great celebratory events or destination experiences of our lives go by in the blink of an eye – a graduation, a birth, a wedding, a surprise party, a destination vacation.

Jesus calls us to be awake (aware and attentive) in the moments we are living now and in preparation for those great celebrations.

As we live our moments in the realm of God's creation, we are sometime more like the wise attendants – focused, attentive, thoughtfully prepared and reliably accomplishing the responsibilities to which we commit ourselves. And sometimes we are more like the foolish attendants – finding ourselves sidetracked and disoriented, scrambling to get back on track.

Perhaps I would have more aptly titled this message **“For what are we attentive?”** For the ten wedding attendants, attentiveness seemed key in whether or not they would be able to engage meaningfully in their journey of preparation for and celebration with the wedding couple.

This morning, I invite us to consider our own attentiveness as it relates to circumstances in our individual lives and circumstances in our communal life as St. Croix United Church. **I wonder: in what area of your personal life are you experiencing an important time of change, shift or growth?** I invite you to wonder how attentiveness would make it possible for you to engage in that change, shift or growth with more depth and grace (for yourself and for others) than if you were to be inattentive.

Now I also wonder: **in what area of the life of our congregation are you experiencing an important time of change, shift, growth?** We are experiencing numerous changes, shifts, and growth. Each of us may find ourselves on one side excited, on one side petrified, on one side exhausted, on another side energized. And, actually, some of us are feeling all of those ways about any given change or shift in our church right now.

One is our consideration of a purchase agreement that would transform a large part of our beautiful People's Park into becoming a home for an elementary school and students for decades to come.

Our Open & Affirming Process is an experience by which we hope to be more explicitly naming our inclusion and empowerment of all people – not because of or in spite of any particular aspect of our personhoods, but to include us as our whole selves.

And we have merged and we will continue merging as two beloved predecessor communities.

So again I ask, will you invite yourself to be attentive? And would that make it possible for you to engage in the changes, shifts, and growths of your and our life with more depth and grace for yourself and for one another. Let's do that, because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Matthew 25:1-13