

Jenifer Gamber  
Proper 27A  
Matthew 25:1-13

*However tired or dim, let your light shine before God and all people. For another world is not only possible, she is on her way. In the name of God of love. Amen.*

Good morning good people of the Christ Churches—the joyful congregations of Christ Church, Wayside and Christ Church La Plata. I bring you greetings from Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde. It is a privilege and honor to be with you and with your rector, Kate and deacon, Joan. Thank you for welcoming me in love.

You have an amazing history here in Southern Maryland. You have been a beacon of God's presence, shining the light of Jesus in Charles County for more than 300 years. That's quite an astonishingly long witness to the love of Jesus in this part of the world. And over those many decades I imagine there have been plenty of times filled with the kind of waiting and expectation that we hear about in the parable of the bridesmaids this morning and that we now experience as a country today.

Before addressing the readings for today, I'd like to say a little about the School that the diocese has launched this fall. Launching a School for Christian Faith and Leadership is one of the goals for the first year of a five-year strategic plan adopted by the Diocese. The mission of the School is part of the Diocese's mission "to draw people to Jesus and embody his love for the world by equipping faith communities, promoting spiritual growth, and striving for justice." You'll notice the diocesan mission addresses three strategic areas: parish revitalization, growing in the Christian faith, and a commitment to equity and justice. Together as a diocese we are committed to revitalizing our congregations to grow the Jesus Movement, inspire every person to grow in faith and equip our leaders to lead well, and to work toward justice for all people.

The focus of the School, and my work, is to develop and offer resources that equip people, both lay and ordained, to meet the changes in our neighborhoods and to inspire followers of Jesus to grow in faith. It's not a brick and mortar school with desks and a chalkboard, but rather a set of offerings—leadership days, webinars, pilgrimages, toolkits, and other opportunities-- to transform leaders and catalyze disciples right here in our portion of the vineyard for the sake of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ and drawing near to the kingdom of God.

Already, we have hosted over a dozen courses. One of the more popular courses is the Sacred Art of Story Sharing led by your own rector, Kate. In this course we are learning how to go out and tell the world about God's love—to be apostles, sharing stories about God's work in our lives and listening for what God's been up to in the lives of the people we encounter in our neighborhoods, our workplaces, in shops, or in the park. Evangelism is about storytelling. Yes, we are called to share Jesus' love with our actions, but we are also have to explain the source of the love that we know in Jesus. We have to use our words.

These stories of God's enduring love are what will get us through our own time of waiting, our own time of uncertainty, division and weariness. Stories of God's love are what will keep us awake to God's dream for the world and ready to greet a new world that is coming. The ancient

Hebrew people knew the power of stories. As did the early Christians. They gathered to tell stories of how God created humanity in God's image. Full and beautiful. Stories of how God's people fell away from God's love and also how God called them back. The Bible is one long love story. And that story continues with us.

God's love story continues as we wait for God's dream for creation to come to fruition. In the imagery of today's gospel, God's love story continues as we wait and prepare for the bridegroom to arrive.

Today's parable of the ten is outrageous. Ten bridesmaids fall asleep waiting to escort a bridegroom who is woefully late to his own wedding party. By the time he arrives, five have run out of oil for their lamps. The five, who were wise enough to bring an extra flask of oil refuse to share from their reserves. So, the five who run out of oil go off to buy more not only miss the arrival of the groom, they are locked out of the party by the groom. "Too late," the bridegroom says, "I do not even know you."

This parable raises so many questions! Why do the bridesmaids have to bring their own light to a wedding reception? Why won't the wise bridesmaids share their oil? How could these stingy bridesmaids be called wise? I might call them the five mean and miserly bridesmaids. Followers of Jesus are supposed to be generous and full of compassion.

What bride would put up with a bridegroom who doesn't show up for his own wedding until midnight? Why the delay? And where *is* the bride anyway? This parable seems like a sitcom gone wrong. What might have been a comedy turns into a nightmare when finally, after keeping his poor bridesmaids waiting for hours, the groom blame *them* for being late — and shuts the door in their faces. The lack of compassion for bridesmaids who had been waiting for hours is not just bad manners, it's cruel.

How can we hear this parable that raises so many questions with open hearts and fresh ears?

We know about waiting. Especially the past week of forever Tuesday as we wait for the results of the election. Patience isn't a strength of modern American society. One article on the front page of Friday's Washington Post read, "As days stretch on, we're forced to practice our least favorite virtue: Patience." How have you been coping? I know that I've probably hit a weekly high for being online, hitting refresh to see how the numbers have changed. I've kept my phone by my bedside, waiting for it to notify me of breaking news, that the wait is over. None of it has really helped.

I wonder about how the community for whom the parable of the bridesmaids was first intended. What were they waiting for and for how long? We do know this. The parable was written for a Jewish community late in the first century who believed that Jesus was returning soon. In their lifetime. There was no abstract hope of an incrementally better world. They were at the bottom of the heap, living life on the edge in a land where a few powerful men and their families controlled the lion's share of wealth. Their place of worship, the temple, was destroyed. They had little wealth and no political power. They were expecting a complete disruption of the world when the man who had called the poor blessed would return, turning the world upside down and bringing justice. They waited desperately. Only, Jesus hadn't yet returned. Judgment hadn't come.

They are probably a lot like the bridesmaids, tired and weary of waiting for things to change, for God's dream for creation to become real. For Jesus to return to this world, as he had promised.

We too are tired. We too are weary. Eight months in a pandemic, unable to gather with our friends and with our families. More than 230,000 Americans have died from Covid-19. High unemployment. People hungry and homeless with months before we can expect to return to any sense of normal.

What is the message in the parable for us today?

This past week in Water Daily, Kate has offered a number of ways into this parable. I'd like to focus on the choices of the foolish bridesmaids. Where exactly did they go wrong? Clearly, they hadn't been wise enough to bring extra oil. But who would have guessed that the groom would be so incredibly late to his own wedding?

Perhaps their fatal mistake wasn't in not having enough oil, but in leaving the party to buy more oil. They assumed that their supply of oil, their light, was more important to the groom than the gift of their presence. So they left the scene just as the groom arrived, at its most crucial moment. They left just as the doors to the party open and the celebration got going, depriving themselves of celebrating the arrival of the bridegroom and depriving the bridegroom of their companionship, support, and love on his special day.

I know too well how hard it is to stick around when my energy is fading. When I feel that I don't have much light to give, when my imperfections are clear, I want to crawl into bed and cover my head with a blanket of darkness. Just last week, when we had to turn the clocks back, I wondered if I had another hour in me to give to 2020.

Like many others, I struggle for perfection, not wanting to offer anything unless I feel it's my very best work. It takes courage to show up when your light is dim. It means being vulnerable. It takes confidence in other people, and in God, to show up with doubts, pain, and weariness and only a flicker of light within.

Perhaps this parable is less of an admonition to store up oil for the long wait and more of an invitation to show up for one another and for God as we are. Fellow educator Debbi Thomas puts it this way, "Only a bridesmaid who trusts in the groom's deep and unconditional compassion, only a bridesmaid who knows that the groom has light and oil to spare, only a bridesmaid who understands that her presence — messy and imperfect though it might be — is of intrinsic value to the groom, will find the honesty and the courage to stay."

Show up whatever your light. Whether it shines brightly or flickers with uncertainty, come and join the party. Dance with your light to usher in God's realm, no matter its condition. You are enough. When you leave the party, no matter how much oil you have in reserves, the light of the community is diminished. The groom has fewer companions.

In the end, it is not our light that shines, it is God's light. Jesus is the light of the world. How do you hold onto God's dream? Show up to the new world that is on her way, no matter the state of your light.

Even if your light is dim, continue practicing the way of love. Turn toward the light of the world. Read the teachings and life of Jesus. Pray daily. Gather for worship with others in community. Bless others in acts of love and justice for others. Reach across division to work toward unity. And rest, taking caring for yourself—for spiritual and bodily health. These are the practices that will help us usher the coming of God's realm.

Keep watch and be prepared. Another world is not only possible. She is on her way.