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11/12/17--University Presbyterian Church  
Matthew 25:1-13

## IN THE MEANTIME

Everyone has different styles of waiting. We wait in different ways. You can easily see these styles on display in any doctor's waiting room. Some people bring things with them to help them pass the time while they wait: a newspaper, a book, some knitting. Most frequently today, you will see people with their faces buried in their mobile phones. Some people choose to wait by people-watching. Some shift in their chairs, jiggle their foot, and heave heavy sighs of impatience.

There is a lot of waiting in life: at the doctor's office, in line at the grocery store, riding a bus, train, or plane. We also find ourselves waiting for big events to happen in life: for the day we will get to retire, for graduation to come, for the big interview next week, for the baby to be born, for the vacation we have planned.

The parable we read from Matthew's gospel today deals with the problem of waiting. Matthew wrote his gospel to Christian communities that had formed after Jesus' resurrection. For a while after Jesus' resurrection, there was wide-spread belief among Christians that Jesus would soon return again and complete the work he had begun. It was believed that Jesus would return to establish his kingdom on earth--a time when the powers of oppression and cruelty would be overthrown and when God's peace and justice would prevail. The early Christians believed that this event would happen very soon. Jesus' second coming was imminent. But then the years kept going by one after another without Christ's return. And so the early Christians were in a quandary. What did this delay mean? How were they to understand the delay in Christ's coming? What was the Church to do?

Matthew includes in his gospel this parable that Jesus tells about waiting. It's an odd story about a wedding festival where ten bridesmaids are waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. The bridegroom is delayed for such a long time that the bridesmaids fall asleep. But then at midnight he suddenly arrives. Now five of the bridesmaids have thought to bring with them some oil for their lamps. But five others have not. The five wise with the oil won't share their oil because they won't have enough. And so the five foolish maids without oil to light their lamps are told to go buy oil for themselves. They go but when they come back the doors to the party are closed and they are shut out from the festivities.

Now, let's just say up front that there are numerous features to this story that are unrealistic even for ancient Palestine, like the excessive length of the groom's delay, and his midnight arrival, and the supposition that the shops that sell oil would be open at midnight. These are all unrealistic--but it is, after all, a parable and not meant to be taken literally. And I could also go into details about the various wedding customs and rituals that were practiced back then Jesus' day that might explain some elements of this story. But in the end, the message the parable delivers is clear: there was an unexpected delay. And some of the maidens were prepared for the delay and some were not. The problem isn't that the five foolish maidens fell asleep waiting for the groom, because all the maidens fell asleep. The issue was that the five foolish maidens were not prepared for the groom's delay. Just like the early Christian churches were not prepared for Christ's delay. Jesus had not come when expected. And this parable speaks to that situation. How does the Church live and conduct itself in the meantime?

When you think about it, a lot of our lives are spent in that uncomfortable place we might call "in the meantime." "In the meantime" are those occasions when we are caught between two conditions in life and we are left waiting in that gap. "In the meantime" takes place

when we find ourselves between jobs, going to one interview after another. We have to live in the meantime. And it takes place when we have been diagnosed with a condition and are getting treatments or when we are sent to rehab after having surgery. "In the meantime" takes place while we wait for our divorce papers to get finalized and when we are waiting to learn the results of our SAT or MCAT scores. We live "in the meantime" when we are counting down the years until we can retire or when your parents won't let you see R rated movies or get your driver's license until you're older. A lot of our lives are spent in that in-between place of waiting.

Maybe you have heard that expression that "life happens in the interruptions." We make our plans in life, but things will inevitably interrupt our plans--good and bad--but that actually much of the meaningful things in life can be discovered in those interrupting events. I would amend this wisdom to say that for us theologically speaking, life and faith are found "in the meantime." In those occasions of being in-between, in those waiting moments, in the gap between where we were and where we want to be, in such occasions we are faced with how we are to live our lives "in the meantime."

This parable was told to Christian churches who were faced with the issue of how they were to live in the meantime--in that time of Christ's delay in returning. Today, our sense of expectancy over Christ's return has been dulled considerably from that of our early Christian ancestors. Few of us live with the same heightened sense of anticipation those early Christians had for Jesus' return. Our churches rarely think much about Christ's return. Maybe then instead of anticipating the arrival of the bridegroom like the maidens in our parable, we modern day Christians are most likely to find ourselves at the midnight hour of our parable: tired, distracted, and unable to see any sign of Christ's presence. The world offers so many other distractions to the walk of faith. We are exhausted from the complexities of our lives. And as our churches

decline in membership and social prominence, some may wonder what is the point of it all and lose interest. There is no sign that the groom is showing up any time soon. It may feel that the Church is in a time of midnight--a time of great darkness.

Of course it is a dark time when a gunman could walk into a church of worshippers and carry out an act of unspeakable violence and evil. A dark time for sure. But the dark threat to Christian churches in our land existed long before last Sunday's massacre in Texas. The dark threat came about over centuries in the rise of power and social prestige of the institutional church that loved itself more than the gospel message of Jesus Christ. The dark threat comes from the enchanting call of consumerism, inviting all of us to love our material goods and wealth more than the gospel message of Jesus Christ. The threat comes from the ways we domesticate the gospel of Jesus Christ, making it tame and pretty instead hearing its call to live boldly and unconventionally. The threat to Christian churches comes when we pay more attention to our buildings than to human suffering and need, and when we accommodate racism, sexism, homophobia and all forms of intolerance into our theology. The growing decline in church membership and overall disinterest in religious affiliation we see in our society may make us feel like the Christian churches in America are in a dark midnight hour, but we've been headed in that direction for a long time. And we find ourselves living "in the meantime"--in the gap between church as we knew it and an uncertain future.

But this is where Jesus' parable still speaks to us today. How do we live in the meantime? Jesus tells us: Stay alert. Keep focused. Be prepared. The five foolish maidens in the parable were not prepared for the groom's delay and thus their lamps were not lit. But Jesus tells his followers earlier in Matthew, "You are the light of the world . . . Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven." Light is

always in the scriptures a symbol for good deeds and righteous living and hope. Let your light shine, Jesus tells us. In just a short while, in this same chapter from Matthew's gospel, Jesus goes on to tell his followers--that's us--what living in the meantime looks like. On the final day of judgment, Jesus will say to his faithful followers: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you . . . for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." This is what it looks to live "in the meantime." This is what it means for us to be a church in the meantime, when we don't know what the future will look like. Jesus tells us to carry on loving, serving, feeding, clothing. This is what it means to live in the meantime in our personal lives. Jesus tells us to stay focused on living out the kingdom of God. Whatever our condition or situation in life--the way you and I can live in the meantime is by carrying out God's love and mercy and justice. And then our light will shine, and our lamps will be trimmed and burning for the arrival of the groom whenever he may come.