

Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church

9/1/2024

Luann Yutzy

Matthew 25:1-13

In the Long Wait

I remember how the haymow smelled that I used to spend lots of time in growing up, especially in the winter, shooting baskets from all corners on the basketball court and on the side where there wasn't any straw or hay. I was perfecting the 3 point-shot before I knew about 3-point shots. It took all of my strength to get the ball even close. I remember how the haymow smells changed whether it was raining or sunny. I remember how the boards felt when I walked on the ones that were loose over on the left side of the court by the eaves. I know how I felt alive as I played basketball and when I walked on the catwalk nearby, we called it the catwalk, above the cattle in the lean-to shed connected to the big barn. The narrow boards, how they dipped down when I walked on them, no side rails.

In the summer, I felt the sharpness of the corn leaves on my arms and face as I walked in between the rows and I remember the peaceful feeling I had seeing the fireflies in the evening above the soybeans that were just turning the deep green in midsummer.

It was a time I felt very connected and alive.

And it wasn't too many more years that I started hearing in church about the return of Christ and we had better be ready and singers like Larry Norman, (if you have heard of him) and his song "I Wish We'd All Been Ready" were what filled my world.

"Life was filled with guns and war

And everyone got trampled on the floor

I wish we'd all been ready.

There's no time to change your mind

The Son has come and you've been left behind."

And there were books about being left behind and movies about the rapture and the world became a very scary place to me.

I became consumed with being left behind. If my house was quiet for a few minutes, I wondered if this was it. Had I been left behind? If I still saw the cows out by the barn did that mean Christ hadn't returned or would they be caught up too when the trumpet would sound? I really didn't know. (Matt. 24:40,41)
How did I know if I was ready enough?

And then I would hear someone shut a door or call out to someone and I would have such relief. I wasn't left behind. We were still here.

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I thought less and less about Christ's imminent return as I left my home community in my 30's to where I didn't think of it at all except to wonder at times, "Is that really what it means or is the coming of Christ a gradual restoration and redemption of systems and the earth, an ushering in of a new and wonderful kingdom?"

In our scripture today in Matthew 25 the story is overall pretty sobering and it is easy to go on tangents with details of the parable of the bridesmaids, like why can't we share the oil and how rude that the bridegroom made the women wait and then it's their fault? The parable could be about the ugliness of the closed door and the Bridegroom represents our entitlement. Yet, overall, the parable is about being prepared. How are we waiting?

And before this passage, starting in Chapter 24, Jesus, in private, gave some clues to his disciples on how to be as they waited for the return of Christ.

"When you hear the Messiah is here or the Messiah was spotted in the desert or down at the music festival in Winfield or if they say the Messiah is at Threshing Days in Goessel, don't go and see, " Jesus said. Don't believe the people who think they know the details and the inside story on this.

In Matthew 23, Jesus admonished the religious leaders and teachers telling them they neglected the important things. Even though they gave 10% of their spices from their gardens; their tithing wasn't anchored in anything of Jesus. They forgot the important things like justice, mercy and faithfulness. (Matthew 23:23a)

And the author, Matthew, has Jesus saying in chapter 24: verse 34, that surely there will be people living now in this time, in the late first century CE, who will still be living when all the signs of the end are here. They will get to see Jesus' return.

Matthew probably really believed this. Clearly, that didn't happen. He really didn't know. No one knows. Not even Jesus. (Matt. 24:36)

I wonder if it is safe to say that there are more important things to be focusing on during this long wait to the end of the ages.

Not to mean we don't remember. Jesus reminded the disciples of the people in the time of the flood how people were eating and drinking right up to the day that Noah got on the boat and even though they had been told, it didn't sink in until the flood came and swept them away. This is how it will be when the Son of man comes, Jesus said.

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I look around at the world today and I see a lot of inequality of suffering. There is so much suffering in some places, incomprehensible horrors right before peoples' eyes, excruciating psychological pain and then in other parts of the world there is no visible suffering, except for the earth crying out from the neglect and destruction. Her cries have been ignored.

We are getting used to disrespect and crude remarks, contempt. Parenting seems to be even harder in this kind of environment and what a confusing place it must be for children, who often are rushed here and there and can tell when anxiety from all of what is happening takes up residence in their house and doesn't leave.

It is very hard to know how to hold all the suffering and turmoil in the world as we hold onto the big picture of all humanity in it together.

I heard often in the hospital setting, families and patients in crisis and suffering trying to make sense of it all by repeating what they had been told some time in their life that God wouldn't give anyone more than they could bear. And I said, "I don't think that is true." Terrible things can happen to us, even to the very young and that is not of God. It isn't some test we have to get through. We live in brokenness. But what I hang onto is that somehow God is with us and will not leave us even when the world can feel like it is crumbling to pieces. Our God is a suffering God and knows. Christ came to be physically among us and be with us in life and God's spirit has remained with us and will remain.

The long wait can be exhausting, and we all will need to sleep and get some rest.

And we may also get a little lost as we wait.

We need wisdom. Wisdom has a lot to do with hope and with a life of loving instruction. A way of being that is open to growing.

Part of our preparation in waiting is noticing what we hold within us so that we can offer our authentic selves, not a facade, or a face behind a mask of ego or false selves.

We need to pay attention to the pain we hold inside of us. As we wait in this life, we do the work of growing so that we can give the light of being whole, knowing we carry pain inside and that is a part of us too.

We have dreams lost inside of us, painful words said to us, cursing words we have said. We carry voices that tell us we aren't worthy, we aren't enough, we aren't special and spectacular. We can do the hard work of seeing that lost part of us and hold it close. This is a part of us too. We often need help in looking at the pain within us. This is our cup of sorrow we carry within us.

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We are in this together.

We also carry joy inside of us in this long wait. We have days where our cup of sorrow is running over and our cup of joy is just a drop and we have days where our cup of joy is more like two cups of joy and our cup of sorrow is not very full.

We do this inner work of knowing what we carry so that we won't lash out at someone and wonder where did that come from? We look at what we hold inside of us so we can choose life and not death. We can give light to situations as we do our own inner work of being authentic as Jesus showed us in how he lived. We have a responsibility to look within and prepare our lives so that we are fully awake and fully alive.

We need to be reminded that God is present now. The Spirit is on the loose in this world and we can be part of what the Spirit is doing. Keep looking for God now, among us. We will find God in the hidden places, in the bold places, in the colorful murals and in the shy prose. We will find God in our friends and families and we will find God in the stranger.

We will find God even in the interruptions, in the intrusions in our carefully planned schedules. It just might be a sacred opportunity to be more prepared for the new heaven on earth.

If we practice staying awake, *present* to life, we will see the opportunities that come our way that we might miss. Interruptions might just be sacred times to actually see someone as a child of God.

We have a role to play in welcoming Christ, as the women did in the parable today.

Being prepared is a *way of life*, more than a one-night wedding party. We live for the long haul. We hope for that day when God will wipe away the tears from our eyes and there will be no more mourning, or pain and suffering and God will make God's home among us again. (Rev. 21:3-4)

And in the meantime, we can add redemption and restoration in any way we can for the benefit of others. Here are six spiritual practices, suggestions for our preparation while we wait. Spiritual practices are **not** meant to shield us from the world or what is happening in the world. Spiritual practices can ground us as people of peace so that we can be **in** the suffering and protest the injustice and find courage to give our lives to caring about the poor and vulnerable among us. **(SLIDE) Practice one a week and ask each other how you lived with that practice.**

- **Add to the beauty.** Leave a place, a situation, a relationship a little more refreshed and better than it was before.

- **Be fully alive.** Especially for the next generation. They need to know it is worth it to grow up. Show how much you love something you do. Let the God-light within you shine out to others as you are fully alive.
- **Don't be so proud to not learn from mistakes.** We fail sometimes. Individuals fail. Faith communities falter. We can learn so much from when we stumble and fall and we name it and then change our ways.
- **Pay attention to the cup of joy and the cup of sorrow** we always have within us. They both are a part of us and can teach us how to be even more present with others when we have been present to ourselves.
- **Plant a tree you will never swing under.** Give in ways that will benefit people you may never know and give to the next generation.
- **Return to the memories of peace within us.** They are a gift from God. My time in our haymow, our old barn, *taught me more about inner peace* than my experience as a child in my church.

God shows up where God shows up.

Showing up is what is important with our sometimes frazzled, exhausted selves, having faith that there is more to life than the salary, the promotion, the recognition. We are a part of something much bigger going on since the beginning of time. We follow the way of Jesus, who was a servant king, who died and rose again. We see signs of the spirit of Jesus on earth in changed hearts and the renewing of our minds, in being last, not first, and living out the fruit of the spirit. We are to carry on. Pass the flame to each other. God's purpose is shown through our everyday life and experiences, where to the best of our ability we help in restoration and bring light in whatever way we can.

Jesus said in the last verse of the book of Matthew, "I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age." It takes faith to hold on to that, to depend on a God we can't see or always feel. A faith that can hold our doubts and our lost times too. Faith is believing without always seeing clearly and we can hold on and walk each other home, giving encouragement when needed. We are a part of each other, interconnected to each in pain and in joy. We are interconnected with creation, the whispering of the wind and the laments of the earth.

We hear you.

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We see each other.

We are here right now

In this long wait together.

May we be authentic people

Open to the opportunities, the interruptions that come into our day and call them sacred preparation in welcoming the whole bridal party, everyone to the great celebration. Amen.

Six spiritual practices in the long wait



- **Add to the beauty wherever you are**
- **Be fully alive**
- **Learn from mistakes**
- **Pay attention to the cup of joy and the cup of sorrow**
- **Plant a tree you will never swing under**
- **Return to the memories of peace within us**