

Reader 1: Jesus told his disciples another parable about the kingdom of heaven.

Reader 2: Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout,

Reader 1: Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'

Reader 2: Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise,

Congregation Left: *Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.*

Reader 2: But the wise replied,

Congregation Right: *No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.*

Reader 2: And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying,

Congregation Left: *Lord, lord, open to us.*

Reader 2: But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

-New Revised Standard Version

"Keep awake?!" No, Jesus, please not that. Matthew, why did you have to put these words in Jesus' mouth at the end of this already edgy story? These are not the words an insomniac wants to hear. We for whom sleep is a fickle beast do not need a divine command to keep awake. But really... those for whom sleep is no struggle probably don't want a command to keep awake either. Sleep is a gift that we finite humans need and that, after a certain age, most of us come to cherish— perhaps especially those of us who don't get enough of it. Heck, maybe that's all of us... Ani DiFranco has a song in which she urges her listeners to be nice, no matter their

circumstances... there's no excuse she sings... "maybe you don't like your job, maybe you didn't get enough sleep, well nobody likes their job, nobody got enough sleep... there's no excuse so just suck up and be nice.... Be nice."

This, of course, is not the only time we hear Jesus say, "Keep awake!"— he gives this command to his disciples in the garden, the night before he dies... but it does no good. The hour is late. The days have been increasingly stressful. That night... under the threat of death... stress was at its peak. While that might make some of us sleepless... it dragged the disciples' eyes shut, repeatedly. And you can't blame them. They are only human. And all humans require sleep... all the time... and that need is heightened in particular circumstances at particular times. Like when someone you love has told you they are about to be killed and then left you to sit in a garden, under cloak of darkness, and think about it... Yeah. Sleep would be a gift... a need... right about then.

While there's no question, in my mind, that Jesus actually wanted the disciples who accompanied him to the garden to stay awake and keep watch that evening... I do not think that this is the best translation of the Greek in this chapter of Matthew. "Keep alert" is an equally valid translation. And, in context, it makes much better sense. You might be wondering about the connection between being alert and sleeping, I'll get back to that. But for now, let's just focus on the context of this command. Immediately before this, Jesus tells a story about ten bridesmaids, five wise and five foolish. And while there is a difference between these two groups, there are also similarities. And the similarity that struck me in my study is the fact that "all of them became drowsy and slept." All of them. The wise ones sleep. The foolish ones sleep. While there is judgment in this passage, no question, no one is judged for sleeping. They had a LONG wait. The sun set hours before. Sitting, waiting, in darkness... sleep is likely going to come. And for all ten it did.

Let's think a bit more about the story. The setting is the night of a wedding feast. Customarily the groom and his new bride return after the wedding ceremony to the groom's father's house for a grand banquet celebration. You can flip back a few pages in Matthew to see another story with a similar setting. In 22:2 we read "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son." Interesting. That sounds very similar to the

intro to this story... “The kingdom of heaven will be like this...” we’re told. If you’re wondering, what precisely in this story reveals the kingdom, I think that’s faithful wondering. Parables are not simple and straightforward stories. They are meant to make us think. So let’s keep thinking.

Bridesmaids had particular work to do for wedding feasts... their work was to welcome the bride and groom into the household. I’d just like to note that, in my experience, weddings with lots of attendants have BIG receptions. I suspect it is safe to assume that a big party was waiting inside the doors of that house. And if that is the case, then LOTS of people had work to do. The spotlight in our story is on the bridesmaids and their lamps. (Image 8- bridesmaids and lamps art) But somebody was cooking. Somebody was decorating. Somebody was probably making music. Somebody was assisting and serving guests. The guests were celebrating—which is work in itself, darn fine work. Everyone, I’m certain, had work to do at that banquet.

The impression we get from this story is that the bridegroom (and presumably his bride—though she’s invisible in this story) are WAY late. They take a LONG time to get to the party. Some of the bridesmaids, the foolish ones, we learn, thought the oil in their lamps already would be sufficient. They expected a rather prompt arrival. Delays on wedding days are not unheard of, but I think we can understand the assumption that they made. Some of the bridesmaids brought extra oil. These remind me of the bridesmaids of today who bring needle, thread, analgesics, safety pins, panty hose, bandaids, altoids... virtually anything that could be needed at the last minute. Not too many bridesmaids like that these days... but it’s always good if there’s at least one. If only all bridesmaids were once boy scouts (who embraced that great motto “Be prepared!”) Anyhow, the wise bridesmaids in our story were prepared. They had their lamps. They had back up oil. And they were certainly grateful for their preparation when the bridegroom finally showed up at midnight. Meanwhile, those who did not bring oil are up a creek... I don’t honestly know where one can buy oil at midnight, but this is what they are sent to do. And by the time they get back, the doors of the house are shut tight. And they cannot get in to the party to join in the work of celebrating that they had long awaited.

While it is tempting to focus on this moment of exclusion in this story, I want us to focus on the period of waiting that precedes it... and two truths about it— everyone had work to do in the wait. And everyone required sleep in the wait. The bridegroom, I think, represents the kingdom of heaven for which the faithful wait. And that the wait is long, and the moment of its culmination unpredictable... well, this is a truth to which we who are followers of Christ 2,000 years after his first coming can attest. In one sense, the kingdom came with Jesus, but in another sense, we're still waiting for it to come in its fullness. Surely the world as it is right now is not an uncomplicated reflection of God's will for humankind and life on this planet. If it is, the God in charge is not the God I worship. I don't need to recite a litany of woes. I think you know what I'm talking about.

Even the state of the church, maybe especially the state of the church, suggests that God's kingdom has yet to fully arrive. Consider the recent state of most churches, including our own beloved church, the past several years. It's been hard, painful, messy, FRUSTRATING, confusing, overwhelming... Yes. There's been good too, lots of it, but I know all of this not so good stuff has been true as well. I have heard enough of you confess it. Some it seems have reached the end of their ropes. (Image 13, end of rope) The struggle has been too long. Change has come too slowly or too quickly. Certain broken patterns seem to stay broken no matter what. Many lamps are flickering. Some lamps have already burned out. (Image 14, empty lamp) Oil reserves, for some, seem to be in short supply.

Here's a suspicion I have, I suspect that those in this congregation who are experiencing burnout have been doing WAY too much of the work in the long wait (and I don't just mean the long wait of COVID... though that has been plenty long), and have been getting far too little rest. I have said to many throughout 20 years of ministry, "You may need at least a year of sabbath rest, because you haven't had even a day of sabbath in a VERY long time." And I mean it. Because the balance has been off. Truthfully, it's off in just about every congregation I've ever known. A very small percentage of the whole does the lion's share of the work... until they burn out, and transfer their lamp to someone with oil... until... Too many congregations have a handful of the sleepless, and a host of sleep walkers.

Sometimes, usually, I think, congregations have unhealthy patterns that encourage this imbalance... possibly organizational systems that funnel rather than distribute power, potentially expectations that a few prominent or paid individuals bear all responsibility, often sloppy or insufficient communication, sometimes territorial attitudes... just to name a handful. But when the wait is long and its culmination unpredictable... we need totally different patterns. Every single member of the body needs to know what his/her/their work is, and what his/her/their work is not... and we know this by attending to our gifts. I once heard a church member testify to having guarded himself against burnout when asked to serve on the mission committee when he first joined the church, to which he said a firm NO. Because he knew his gifts and knew this was not for him. But in the years that followed he served plenty- in numerous ways. He has done the work to which he is called, and let others handle the work to which he is not called. I heard a similar testimony from a church member who served on every board and committee, but finally arrived in a spot that actually fit him. It can take time to find our niche. But it's important to search for it. And to live into it diligently. We need to stock up on whatever it takes to help us do the work we're called to do— gathering our back up oil, if you will.

Sometimes we take on work that is really not ours because it seems that if we don't do it, it won't get done. Sometimes other people give us the strong impression that this is the case. I know I've taken on work because I've had this impression or been given this impression MANY times. But when I do that, I end up miserable, exhausted, and not much help to anyone, because I don't have the necessary gifts to sustain me for the work I've taken on. And, at the same time, I may well be blocking someone who has those gifts from stepping up and serving. And if there truly is no one to do a particular work... it may well mean that it is not the time for that work to be done. It's time to let something go.

If some take on work that doesn't belong to them, it is usually because others are failing to take on much or any work at all. Sometimes this lack of engagement is rooted in fear. Sometimes it results from a sense that one is not welcome. Sometimes from a lack of invitation. Sometimes it results from a lack of education and formation in faithfulness. Sometimes it's because burnout happened a long time ago and there's just no energy left.

Whatever the cause, under work and over work are both problems, and they are usually related problems, for a community seeking to grow and thrive in the long haul of kingdom waiting.

Here's one of my deepest hopes for this beautiful faith community. My hope is that every member will find his or her work in the body and live into healthy rhythms of work and rest in church involvement. I believe this is key to honoring the command to "Keep alert!" We will be able to be alert to signs of the coming kingdom because we are engaged, prepared, playing our part... and sleeping when we need to. It's hard to be alert with heavy eyes. In the long haul of kingdom waiting we ALL have work to do, and we ALL require rest. (Right now... some folks may need to rest for a good, long while. And some folks may need to step up. But even in the stepping up, I pray that we will cultivate a healthy balance of work and rest. The balance that keeps us going down the long, long road... the good news, friends, is that the bridegroom hasn't arrived yet... the kingdom isn't here yet... the doors have not yet been closed and locked. God in Christ will bring the kingdom when it's time, it is on us to prepare to greet it at that unknown time and hour— by working AND resting-- in balance.