

Over the years, I have participated in a few hundred weddings. For most of them I served as the musician. And, since I have been ordained, I have **officiated** for several weddings. Through this plethora of wedding experiences, there is one thing I have learned: a wedding is one of the most emotionally charged events people ever experience. And, quite honestly, because weddings are so loaded with emotion, they are **fragile** events containing great potential for mishap and disaster. Even the smallest issue can create emotional explosions as people are stretched thin and as deep feelings and personal issues easily rise to the surface. There are tears, profound hope, joy, and sometimes even anger, resentment and frustration. Even buried grief often comes to the surface during wedding events. And, when these things happen, it is always interesting to watch how people respond or react to the challenges. Frequently, in the chaos of the moment, they are simply **unaware** of what is really happening, unable to recognize what is causing the emotional explosions and expressions.

So, as we hear today's gospel reading, it is quite significant that at the end of his life, literally during the last week of his life when he knows he is about to die, Jesus chooses the metaphor of this most human,

emotionally weighted event as the context for a teaching parable about the kingdom of heaven.

To understand this parable, it is **helpful** to understand wedding customs of that day. Guests would assemble at the home of the bride where they were entertained by **her** parents as they waited for the groom. Then, when the bridegroom approached, all bridesmaids and guests would light torches and go out to meet the bridegroom. Everyone would then walk in procession to the groom's home where **his** parents were waiting. The ceremony would take place and it was followed by an extended banquet which would continue for several days.

So, in this story that Jesus tells, the groom does **not** show up on time. Several hours pass and many in the wedding party fall asleep. Then, at midnight, they are awakened as someone loudly shouts out, "He's coming." Well, the bridesmaids wake up to get moving and ready. They trim their lamps and head out to meet the groom. However, five of the ten have used up their oil and have none left. And, as they attempt to borrow from the other wiser bridesmaids, their request is rejected. They frantically begin searching for oil and miss out on the procession. Then, when **they** finally get to the groom's home, they are locked out and turned away.

Jesus ends this story by saying, “**Keep awake!** You do not know the day nor the hour.”

The writer of Matthew’s gospel is asking this question, “What shall we do while we wait for Jesus to return?” The early Christian community to which Matthew is writing had to constantly adjust to the reality that Jesus did not soon return as they had expected. By the time Matthew wrote this gospel, the discipleship community may have been waiting for Jesus’ return for fifty years or more. Most of the eye-witnesses were likely dead. The church had spread, but it had also been oppressed. The Temple had been destroyed, wreaking havoc on Jewish and Christian communities. Where was Jesus? This story communicates the message to Matthew’s community that their mission was to wait expectantly and in the meantime, live faithfully, live courageously in the midst of persecution, **live with hope, stay awake and aware.** As we hear this parable, our context is very different and we have been waiting much longer than Matthew’s community. Yet, living and waiting faithfully, courageously and hopefully is still our mission. Our call is to stay awake and be aware of God’s presence as God comes to us.

The point of this whole parable is a call to live expectantly, hopefully and aware. As Christians, our **hope** rests completely on our trust that the

God who created the world **continues** to love this world and **continues** the process of creation until the project is complete. Our hope rests in the promise that God will continue to redeem and save the world by coming into it with love and grace, in the person of Jesus Christ.

Now, as I say this, I am very aware of the horror, despair and chaos of the last several weeks. We have not only seen natural disasters, we have seen the horror we humans are capable of rendering upon others, like the massacre in Las Vegas and then the shooting last weekend at a Texas church. There are times in human history when the forces of oppression, injustice, violence and torture make justice, compassion and love seem so very fragile. And, in the face of such horror, our hearts scream out the unanswerable questions, “Why, God, why?” and “Where is God?” But, like those early Christians, in these chaotic times we are called to wait, to live in hope and to stay awake and aware. You see, living in the hope that we are given in Christ does **not** mean we are immune to the harsh realities of history. It **does** mean that we live confidently and **expectantly**, trusting that the Lord of history continues to come into life with compassion and redemption and hope. And, it means staying awake and aware so we can see how God is very present to us in each moment.

To become aware of God's presence in our lives, we have to accept what is often difficult, particularly for people in a success-driven culture. We have to accept that human culture is in a mass hypnotic trance. Far too often, we are sleep-walkers and unaware of God's grace and presence to us. We human beings do not naturally see; *we have to be taught how to see*. And, this happens as we live together in Christian community, as we participate in the work of the faith community, as we courageously gather together despite situations that might otherwise create fear, and as we weekly gather together to receive God's living Word and be fed by the very life of God. As we wait, even in times of chaos, these are the things that enable us to stay awake and aware as God is **always** present to us and as the God's kingdom is **always** coming, breaking into history and breaking into our lives.

The good news in the midst of all of life's challenges is this: the bridegroom **will** come, the bridegroom is always coming, and the love of God **will** continue to appear in our lives in surprising and unexpected ways. You see, Jesus Christ comes when Christian people live in hope and never give up. Jesus Christ comes when faithful disciples express love and compassion and work for justice, even in the face of violence and fear. Jesus Christ comes when we see God's presence in people who are

different from us, when we are able to see our Muslim neighbors, immigrants, refugees, and people whose sexual orientation is different from ours as people created in God's image and dearly loved children of God. Jesus Christ comes when those who suffer know they are ultimately safe in God's love. Jesus Christ comes and the kingdom breaks into earth when faithful people live in hope, not fear, and give themselves to the work of God's kingdom and God's reign.

I was reading an article this morning about a cosmic encounter that will take place early tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning, the planets Venus and Jupiter will pass each other in the sky. But, the interesting thing is, you must be **awake** before sunrise if you want to experience this cosmic encounter. This news made me again realize that cosmic encounters are happening to us all of the time as the God of creation, the Cosmic Christ, surprisingly breaks into our lives. **But**, we need to stay **aware and awake** to recognize these cosmic encounters.

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning! Wait with hope and stay awake! The bridegroom is on the way.