

November 12, 2017 Pledge Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Matthew 25:1-13; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

What Time Is It?

There was a party held recently, right here, in Chicago—for atomic scientists. It was the annual banquet for an organization that was started back in the fifties by the atomic scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project—the makers of the first atomic bomb. Not long after creating that, the scientists created something called the Doomsday Clock. It's not a real clock, but rather a way of conveying, simply and visually, the likelihood of disastrous nuclear conflict. How close are we to Doomsday? How close are we to midnight? Just after the advent of the nuclear age we were pretty close: two minutes to midnight. But things changed, they moved the clock hands a little bit back, and since then it's fluctuated. In time, in addition to threats posed by nuclear warfare, the clock calculation has taken other things into account as well: climate change, biological weapons, cyberthreats. Not so long ago, the Doomsday Clock time was as far as seventeen minutes from midnight. This year, they moved the clock hand closer, the second closest to midnight that it's ever been. That was back in January.

It's been a difficult year. Hardly a week goes by, it seems, without news about North Korea, or terrorist attacks, or cyberattacks, or the bitter divide between and within political parties, or another mass shooting, this last one in a church. For many in this year of our Lord, 2017, it's been a time of great sadness, anxiety, fear.

Today's gospel parable doesn't seem much help, what with its lack of sharing and doors shut, people denied and left out in the dark. You can recognize it's a parable, as one Biblical commentator says—and I think this is especially true of parables in Matthew—you can recognize a parable when you have this reaction: "I don't know what you mean by that but I don't like it." So much about this story we have today sounds grim, and so much strange: so many bridesmaids (though I've seen some large wedding parties); a celebratory day so far off schedule, (though as a pastor, I can attest that weddings do tend to run late); and some of the bridesmaids are wise, and some are foolish, which feels somehow vaguely stereotyping, (though having been a bridesmaid several times, I've seen and been both); with some bridesmaids running out of oil for their lamps, (which is just weird, because who carries a bouquet with a lantern?). But, running out of oil, they go running on an errand when it's time to be at the main event, the whole reason they are there. In terms of the story, the whole reason the bridesmaids exist is to be with the bridegroom at the wedding banquet, but they miss it. What's up with that?

A pastor I know once told me he was doing a funeral for an elderly man, the pastor was about to start the church service, when the daughter of the deceased told him she needed to go fill up her car with gas. The pastor thought, "You couldn't have done that earlier?"

That anecdote seems a pretty good parallel with today's parable, it even mentions fuel; it seems a good fit, except for one thing. This isn't a parable about a funeral. This is a parable about a wedding banquet. Ears trained in Christian imagery know that's a sign—a wedding banquet is shorthand for the ultimate consummation: the time when God makes all things right; which is a thing beyond human comprehension, a thing we can only speak about sideways, in strange parables.

But though it mentions midnight, today's parable is not about Doomsday, it's about a party. Midnight also being a sign of really good party. Today's parable is about being ready to party—being ready for the party that God is throwing. Some would say that's the very reason we exist.

It is all too easy to miss that. There are so many things going on in the world, going on in our own lives, that we can feel anxious about—and rightfully so. There are so many things going on to feel sad about—and mourn them we must. But that’s not all. There is something distinctive about those who are part of a Christian community; a distinctive difference that comes with life in Christ. We grieve, but as it says in 1st Thessalonians, we do not grieve as those who have no hope.

There was a woman in my previous congregation who was part of the music ministry, a choral leader. I don’t know how she found her way to that church, she grew up in a different part of the country, in a different Christian tradition. She found many of the things Lutherans do strange. What a blessing it was to have her there, what a blessing to know that sister in Christ! She had been through some hard times in her life, you could see it in the depths of her eyes, hear it in the depths of her voice, hear it in the depths of her prayers, which she would unfurl on your behalf spontaneously when you thought you were just talking together—and then you would realize that’s just what you needed. And then she would reach into her humongous purse and pull out her anointing vial, I am not making this up, she carried it with her wherever she went, a small flask of scented oil that she would dab on the back of your hands while speaking holy words. Just thinking about her fills me with joy, encourages me yet again, reminds and assures me of the goodness God is bringing to fruition even in difficult times we cannot understand. That woman is one of the wisest bridesmaids I know. She is always ready with her oil.

Hope is our oil. Hope is the fuel for our lamps, which we carry with us that there may be light, the light of the world, the light of Christ, the bridegroom, for whom we wait, for whom we exist. As Christians, we do not live in dread, we live in hope. As Christians, living in hope, we are always ready for the music to start and the dancing to begin. And not just ready for it to begin, we begin now, singing and dancing, partying right now.

We’ve had a number of parties at church this fall—which, I think, is us making a theological statement—as a member also remarked to me, in an email. The email had a dashed off feel to it, may have been typed with thumbs, maybe that was part of why it ended with this memorable, Yoda-like statement: “More parties, I think God wants.”

More parties, more parties.

One of the parties we’ve had was just last night, a party that included dancing, square dancing. It was a tie-in with our Fall Stewardship campaign, whose theme is “Generosity Two-Step.” Today we’ve arrived today at Pledge Sunday. Some may think of it as Doomsday. I could repeat that old cliché about how you’ll never see a U-Haul hitched to a hearse. “You can’t take it with you,” is one of many good reasons to give, among many other good biblical, practical, spiritual, and theological reasons. Above all, though, there is this: giving, pledging, generosity, makes a statement—a statement of hope: we give and live in hope, hope in the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.