

A young, dashing World War II pilot touring the Pacific in the early 1940s was doing his duty as best he could, but anxious to return to his beloved fiancée.

A bright young woman back in the States awaited his arrival far less patiently than she would let on.

They had made a solemn vow in the face of literal war to share whatever remained of their lives together, but neither the bride nor the bridegroom had any idea when they could actually be married. Powers far beyond their control decided when—and how—an army pilot touring the Pacific could take leave for a wedding. Or if he would even come home at all . . .

In the meantime, as they waited, they got ready. He saved every penny in the hopes of one day supporting a large family. Four daughters, it turned out to be. She filled her Hope Chest with everything she could think of to establish a happy home, including the silver that now sits on my dining room table.

Finally the notice came. He would be home in four days. And he could stay for a weekend. And then he would have to fly back out again. So, with exactly four days’ notice, because they had been preparing while they were waiting, the bride and her family pulled off a truly fabulous wedding, while her beloved flew halfway around the world to meet her at the altar.

“He comes,” they shouted with joy. “He comes,” they sighed with relief. “The Bridegroom finally comes!” And they all lived happily ever after . . . (My grandparents . . .)

This is what the kingdom of heaven is like, Jesus tells his disciples. His inner circle. Even as Roman soldiers surround the city of Jerusalem, three days before they nail him to the cross. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus says to them in the midst of such great anxiety, the reign of God, he says, the final consummation of God’s justice and peace is like a wedding.

A moment of pure joy, pure hope, pure celebration. No matter what literal or spiritual wars rage beyond the happy couple in their moment of wedded bliss.

That moment is not yet here, Jesus says. The bridegroom has been delayed. We have no idea when he will finally come home, Jesus says. But he *is* coming, just like this reign of God we call the kingdom of heaven: the justice and peace of finally figuring out how to live together as God’s good creation.

The wise ones, Jesus says, are in it for the long haul. Preparing, saving, investing in the light. So it may shine bright, in the even deeper darkness that seems to prevail so strongly, while we keep waiting, and waiting . . .

The foolish ones waste what they have upfront. They are ‘in it for a minute.’ They have nothing left to give when life turns out differently than they planned. And they succumb to the darkness. And the bridegroom cannot recognize them when he finally does come.

This is harsh language for those of us who believe God’s final word is always and finally grace. Why don’t those five bridesmaids with oil share their light with the ones who lacked? Isn’t that the Christian message? The feeding of the five thousand was all about sharing, wasn’t it?

But this is a different audience than the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus is speaking directly to the disciples here. To the inner circle. To the ones who have made a deep commitment (kind of like a marriage) to preaching and living the kingdom of heaven—of justice and peace, where we have finally figured out how to live together as God intended from the beginning.

And the disciples, who are nearing the end of their three year journey with Jesus, at the edge of Jerusalem, where Jesus will end up on a cross just a few days later, have made this commitment through thick and through thin. For richer or poorer. In sickness and in health. For as long as they all shall live.

And Jesus knows that commitment will test them to the furthest stretches of their faith. They will have to be ready. They have to be in it for the long haul.

Like the bridesmaids in the parable, the disciples have a special job to do. They are supposed to shine their light on the coming of the bridegroom, on the coming of the kingdom of heaven. *And to shine forth the hope that the kingdom will come even if it has been delayed!* They are not ordinary wedding guests. In fact the rest of the party depends on these bridesmaids to hold forth the light hope, for as long as it takes, *so the entire community can hold onto hope for the long haul.*

They simply must have oil in their lamps to do the job they have been assigned. If they do not have oil, they have failed as bridesmaids. Period.

Which brings us to First United Presbyterian Church, in the midst of our Fall Stewardship Season, in the midst of a pending ecological crisis, on the other side of an economic crisis, coming to terms with the capacity of our own resources, and yet still called by God. And committed in that call to hold forth the light of hope that the justice and peace God intended for humanity from the beginning of time until the end.

In the meantime, are we wise enough to focus the oil of our energy on the lamps that really matter, nurturing the fuel we need for today sustain the mission before us for the long haul? We will avoid the foolish temptation to burn it all up brightly now but burned out too soon? Will we save up our pennies, like the WWII pilot preparing for the family that is coming down the road? Will we fill up our Hope Chest with the emblems of our future home? Will we have what it takes to keep hope alive, even in the deepening darkness, because we have made sure we still have enough light to shine right on through it?

If our first six months together is any indication, I think we will. I think we already are! And as we continue forward together, I believe with everything in me that the reign of God working through this congregation really is coming, even if it feels so far away. Like a beloved flying halfway around the world to meet us at the altar. So we may all live happily ever after . . .

I pray it may be so. Amen.