Matthew 25.1-13

This week we have Jesus telling yet another flummoxing parable. The world of the parables is often so removed from our own experience that we spend a lot of time just trying to decipher their literal actions, let alone their metaphorical or parabolic sense. Why are the young women expected to wait on the bridegroom in the first place? Was that a common wedding practice? Why do the supposedly "wise" young women refuse to share their oil with the foolish ones? Are they just being selfish? Once the party starts won't the light be available to everyone? Jesus tells us all to "keep awake," but I feel the need to point out that, in fact, all of the young women fall asleep, not just the foolish ones.

It is the latest example of why a parable is not a simple object lesson, made to confirm for us that we're on the right side of the law. Instead, it helps shift the ground under our feet, making us to question what exactly we think we know, to reexamine our place in God's economy. The kingdom of heaven often runs counter to the currents of our expectation. Many of us have been taught to smooth out these wrinkles for the satisfaction of certainty: get right with God, or else you may be caught with your oil run out, and Jesus Christ won't even know you.

Many of us crave this kind of certainty. Do I measure up? Have I done all I can do? And depending on your personal temperament you may conclude "Yes, I am one of the wise ones" or "No, I fear I am one of the foolish ones." But I believe that the "keep awake" in this parable is telling us not to put our faith—or our doubts—in the wrong place. In other words, it's not about what I do, about losing my soul because I forgot to pack the provisions, but rather about what God has done and and does provide. It's about keeping awake to the bridegroom who has already drawn near.

You see, to the early church, Jesus' second coming was imminent. They believed they were *ready* for the bridegroom with the expectancy of the wise young women, lamps trimmed and burning. But with their eyes fastened diligently on the door, they grew weary and fell asleep anyway. They believed that the bridegroom would show up from outside. And then, they thought, he was delayed for so long.

In the church of the 21st century we see perhaps more clearly the paradox of a kingdom which is both already and not yet. The advent and

incarnation of Christ in the person of Jesus is the kingdom come on earth. Everything necessary for salvation has already been done. And still, everything is not yet as it should be; everything is not yet as it shall be.

We pray for God's kingdom to come on earth in the same way it exists in heaven. We hear Jesus proclaim that the kingdom is at hand, has drawn near. But then we forget to keep watch for its signs here, in the already time. We, maybe especially we in the mainline church, fall asleep to the ways that the Holy Spirit is pulling us forward. Maybe the danger isn't so much that the door might be closed in our faces but that we get so stuck on a particular vision of the church or the community that we do not see the bridegroom who is among us.

You've heard me talking for the last several weeks about how stories tell us. By uncanny coincidence I attended a training this week, which underscored how the stories we tell about ourselves can shape our behavior in ways both positive and negative.

But maybe the easiest way to explain what I'm talking about is to tell you a story. For nearly 20 years I attended the oldest Lutheran church in Atlanta, St. Johns, founded in 1869. For its first 50-some years it operated as a German-language church; the first pastors had names like Heinigen, Schramm, Vollbrecht, and Lerner. The men's fellowship had a brewery in the basement (that probably raises eyebrows among the Norwegians here), and while the church eventually began conducting services in English around the second world war, the congregation kept their identity as a primarily German church. Holding on to this story, their shared heritage, helped them weather three geographical moves, from downtown Atlanta to their current home in the midtown Druid Hills neighborhood. It was a story that stood them in good stead.

But then the neighborhood began to change. Residents of the neighborhood moved out of the city as part of White Flight to the suburbs. The surrounding mansions with their spacious front lawns became ramshackle or abandoned. Some of the members moved with them. The story that the congregation told about itself, the story about its German heritage and the faithful pioneers that began worshipping on Broad and Marietta streets in the 1800s, was not the story that they needed for today. In fact, that story became a barrier to full participation in congregational life.

A charismatic young pastor led people into the neighborhood streets with a message of feeding the hungry and housing the homeless, and began to attract young families to the congregation. But the young families (who are now older than I am) remember that for years they were not welcomed into the already-formed adult Sunday school, until finally in frustration they started their own. I imagine something like two separate congregations worshiping in one building. There was no felt narrative to connect them. When the young pastor left for another call, members started to drift away again. The congregation had fallen asleep in its own story. Who was God calling them to be *today?* Where was God at work in their midst?

Finally, in 2000, down to a regular attendance of about 20 people, St. John's called Bradley Schmeling, a pastor with significant gifts in pastoral care, leadership, and especially preaching, who also happened to be gay. Once again young families started flocking to the church. There was excitement and energy around this talented preacher and liturgist. Divinity students from the Candler School of Theology came to see what all the fuss was about, and stayed on: Methodists, Presbyterians, and even for a while a rabbinical student. But there was still no connecting narrative. If the popular pastor were to leave, the pendulum would simply swing back.

What happened next is a story that many of you have heard before. The policy of the ELCA at the time forbid pastors and rostered leaders from being in gay or lesbian relationships. Pastor Bradley first met his life-partner Darin, another Lutheran pastor, at a Lutherans Concerned gathering. When Bradley told the bishop about this new relationship, as he had promised to do, the bishop demanded his resignation. Bradley, however, maintained that he was called by God and the church to be a pastor and refused to resign. St John's supported his decision.

In the ensuing church trial, in front of a disciplinary board from around the national church, congregation members testified to the growing ministry at St. John's and the wrongheadedness of the policy. High-profile pastors and theologians, including the first presiding bishop of the ELCA, Herbert Chilstrom, also supported his case. During the trial, St John's held prayer vigils, worship services, and even a concert with Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls to bolster these efforts. News stations sent cameras and journalists, and for a short while we enjoyed a kind of celebrity status among church folk. But for those who participated in this work, a new story of God's

providence and abundance began to take shape. The belief that God truly shows no partiality but loves every person just as they were created.

Although the disciplinary board stated that they had no choice but to find Pastor Bradley guilty of the charges, they added that they believed the policy was wrong and should be changed. In 2009, the churchwide assembly finally voted by a slim margin to change the policy and allow pastors in same-gender relationships to serve the church. Bradley continued as pastor of St. John's until 2012.

At a certain point, wanting to better reflect its neighborhood, St. John's began to work toward being a church with no racial majority. In 2012 St. John's called Beverly Brown Shaw, a Black woman, as our first female pastor. A number of Black or multiracial families followed her to St. John's and became deeply involved in the church's leadership. Several Asian American families joined and also rolled up their sleeves. One of them is currently the vice-president of the ELCA. The story had shifted. No longer were we the German church; we were the church who had supported Bradley Schmeling and helped to change national policy. Without a change to the story it told, St John's could probably never have changed and grown in this way.

St. John's is still a thriving congregation today, with challenges, of course, like every congregation. They await the next new story that God is calling them into. And so the question I want to leave you with is this. What is the story we tell about Bethesda/ Immanuel? What is the story we tell about God's claim and call on our lives? What is the story others tell about who we are and what we do? It doesn't have to, in fact it shouldn't, look like the story St. John's tells today. It is our very own story, with God as main character. Keep awake, my friends. The signs of the kingdom are all around us, pulling us forward, steering us into the next great chapter. Amen.