

Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
November 8, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year A, Proper 27: Amos 5:18–24; Psalm 70; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18;
Matthew 25:1–13*

Today's gospel lesson belongs to Matthew alone. It is one of a series of parables on watchfulness told by Jesus in Jerusalem. They begin in Matthew with Jesus' words, "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near . . . So also, when you see all these things, you know that [the Son of man] is near . . . Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place."¹ Today's parable is the third of five; the last two are for the next two Sundays, the final Sundays of this church year.

Matthew's gospel is shaped by the need to understand the delay of Christ's Second Coming. Matthew and Luke don't omit these words from Mark, "And [Jesus] said to [his disciples], 'Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.'"² Paul, too, writing 20 years or more before

¹ Matthew 24:32–34.

² Mark 9:1.

Mark, expected the imminent return of the Lord.³ These parables are about how believers are to wait for their Lord's return.

Daniel Harrington, in his commentary on Matthew, points out that this parable uses a title for Jesus, "bridegroom," that is used of the LORD—the sacred and unspoken Hebrew Name of God in Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.⁴

Neither Matthew nor Luke details the wedding customs that would be known to their readers. A marriage agreement—contract—would be negotiated in the bride's home by her father and the bridegroom. When the deal was done, the groom would return at the appointed time with whatever payment was agreed. Then he and the bride would go to his own house, accompanied by family and, in good times, many others for a celebration. Let it be noted that none of the called wise maidens offers to share their oil with those who aren't as prudent as they are.

³ 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 1 Corinthians 7:29.

⁴ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 350. See also: Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28 A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 232 n.39.

This isn't the only passage in Matthew that seems to be a contradiction of other words Jesus speaks in this gospel. When Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother, Peter says, "As many as seven times?" Jesus responds seventy times seven. Then Jesus tells the story of a debtor who one-time fails to forgive the debt owed to him; he is put in jail until his debt with his own master is settled.⁵

There's an earlier wedding story in Matthew, in which a king orders his soldiers to fill his banquet hall because those who were invited did not come. His instruction is, "Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find."⁶ The soldiers bring at least one guest who is not appropriately dressed. When the king sees this man, he says, " 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.' "⁷

The Jesus we hear about today doesn't seem to me to be the same Jesus who, when criticized by Pharisees

⁵ Matthew 18:21–35.

⁶ Matthew 22:9.

⁷ Matthew 22:12–13.

for eating with sinners, said to them, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”⁸

Matthew and Luke both share the story of a shepherd and a lost sheep. In both stories, the shepherd leaves ninety-nine behind, finds the lost sheep, and rejoices in finding it.⁹

In Easter Season, we use Eucharistic Prayer D, the fourth of four Eucharistic Prayers in Rite Two. As Eastern and Roman Catholic prayers have done since the fourth century, this prayer allows for intercessions—an ancient holy practice now recovered.¹⁰ This is the petition that I treasure: “Remember all who have died in the peace of Christ, and those whose faith is known to you alone; bring them into the place of eternal joy and light.”¹¹ It captures the meaning of Jesus' promise made in John of wide and open doors for all to enter into God's rest. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the

⁸ Matthew 9:13.

⁹ Matthew 18:10–14; Luke 15:3–7.

¹⁰ Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 378.

¹¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 375.

sheep. And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.”¹²

I don't understand the evil and sin in this world, but I do trust and believe that whatever evil and sin we have faced in this life will be transformed by the grace of the eternal life of the world to come.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹² John 10:14–16.