

"Are we there yet?"

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
on Sunday November 12, 2017
Pentecost 23

Text: Matthew 25: 1-13

(Sermon by Rev. Catherine Somerville)

Why is that children understand what it means to wait expectantly, much more so than older folks? Is it because we are tired and preoccupied, and we have been disappointed by the things life throws our way? Or is it because we have forgotten how to wait?

It is significant that near the end of his life, at the time made ripe for summing things up, Jesus told story after story about what it means to wait upon God. This time the story was about a wedding.

"The kingdom of heaven will be like this," Jesus said...

It helps to know about the wedding customs of the day in order for us to get inside this story. Weddings back then were every bit as emotionally charged as ours today, with the same potential for mishap. The guests would assemble at the home of the bride. As they waited for things to start, they would be entertained as everyone prepared for the groom to arrive. When the groom approached, the guests, including the bridesmaids, would light lamps and go out to meet him. The family of the bride, and her parents, and all her relations would parade through the streets, to the groom's home, where his parents would be waiting for the ceremony to begin. A banquet would follow and continue on for several days.

Now, in the story Jesus told, for some reason that we are not aware of, the groom doesn't show up on time. Hours pass, twilight falls and many people drift off to sleep. Finally, as the clock strikes midnight, the groom appears. The bridesmaids leap into action. The darkness calls for lamps to be lit in order to head out and meet the groom. But five of the lamps have run out of oil, and the bridesmaids have no reserves. They attempt to borrow some, and while they are searching, they miss the procession. The music plays. Laughter is heard. The doors open to the feast. The bridesmaids would have stumbled their way through the dark to the groom's house, but by the time they arrive, the doors are locked and they are dismissed.

Expectant waiting is easier when we hear a new twist to a familiar story. Anglican priest and writer, Herbert O'Driscoll, helped me to see this story in a new way. I have always thought it was a reminder about emergency preparedness, about making sure there are batteries in the flashlight before the power goes out in a storm. O'Driscoll offers a whole new and wider understanding.

"The kingdom of heaven will be like this..."

He reminds us that this is a story about choices, about lines being drawn. It takes a village to celebrate a wedding. Everything stopped to celebrate the joy of the two people. Some were ready for the party, and some were not. Our faith has to be a living thing, watchful and alert. Faith cannot be just passively received and we expect it to endure. It needs to be nourished and deepened.

He says, "I find our Lord speaking to me in another way. I never know when God passes by in my experience, when eternity intersects with time, and spirit with flesh. I never know when a door between the worlds opens, and I am invited for a moment to a wedding. I may be invited to taste the sweetness of God in a moment in worship, or in a moment of real friendship, or in passion, or in a moment of beauty discovered in art or nature. But if such things are offered, then I must be ready when the invitation comes. I must assume that any moment is the potential moment, any place is the potential place, any conversation or any encounter is ready for an encounter with God."

In the seventeenth century, there was a Carmelite monk named Brother Lawrence who lived in Paris. His real name was Nicholas Herman. He was raised in extreme poverty, and he joined the army in order to receive a ration of food each day. He was wounded, had a spiritual awakening, and served for a while as a valet to an officer. At about the age of 26, he entered a monastery, and he was assigned to work in the kitchen. He worked in the kitchen all of his life. He never rose to be a script writer, or a reader, or the abbot. But in the work of the kitchen, he found God. What many people consider drudgery became a place of peace for Brother Lawrence. People stopped by the kitchen and he talked with them. He talked about seeing God in the most ordinary moments of life, like washing the dishes, peeling the potatoes, or sweeping the floor.

He spoke about how we might let God into the living of our days and how we might live in a state of expectant waiting. Through the years, he took to writing some of these conversations down. Following his death in 1691, the letters were gathered up and compiled into a small volume of work, which continues to be a read to this day. The book is called ***The Practice of the Presence of God***.

Here is one of the most famous passages from that book: "He (God) does not ask much of us; merely a thought of Him from time to time, a little adoration, sometimes to ask for His grace, sometimes to offer Him your sufferings, at other times to thank Him. Lift up your heart to him during your meals and in company. The least little remembrance will always be the most pleasing to Him. One need not cry out very loudly. He is nearer than we think."

For Brother Lawrence, life became a continual conversation with God, one that he knew we must keep at with practice, determination and perseverance. He taught us that we can find God in all the little things that we do with great love. "See not the greatness of the work. See rather the love with which it is performed." In his life, as he washed the dishes and peeled the potatoes and made room for conversations with visitors, he lived with the expectation that he would meet God that very day.

I believe this is how we can live the invitation of Jesus. There is a way to live with expectation, knowing that every conversation we have, every task we do, can be seen as an opening to an encounter with God.

So how do we live expecting to meet God this day? I am a practical person and I like clues in sermons, so I decided to give you five clues I have been thinking about, five ways that you may encounter God in your living. I am sure you will come up with your own list, and I am itching to hear what you discern. But here are some practices I have found helpful for me to kindle my awareness and my expectation.

The first practice: Be aware of your words, especially talk that is judging. I have been thinking about the power of words a lot more lately, because we are hearing so many hate-filled, angry words in the world, and I am increasingly aware of how quickly our talk falls into the trap of judging. Rather than stating the facts like "The traffic is slow on Paris Street in the late afternoon," we talk about the idiot driver in front of me who doesn't know how to use a signal, and who cut in front of someone causing an accident that shut down a lane of traffic and the police took an entire hour, because they were too busy eating donuts, to attend to their work, and I was late for my meeting." I challenge you to try living one day without speaking words of judgement.

It is hard to do; we need to make judgements because life is busy and there is so much information coming our way. But increasingly, our words are pinching and they are offered solely to cause hurt. So be aware of your words. That is the first practice.

The second practice is to say yes. Richard Wagamese in his book *Embers* offers this insight. "There are thousands of ways to say "no", "but", "I can't", "it's impossible", "it's too late," but there is only one way to say yes. With your whole being. When you do that, when you choose that word, it becomes the most spiritual word in the universe, and that one word can change your world." Jack and I have a bit of standing joke in our home. Often I will start a conversation with words like, "I have just had the greatest idea. I think we should..." And it is right at this point, where he says, "No." And then I say, "Hold on. Can you at least let me finish the sentence before you say no?" Now, as soon as I start with another idea, he says no, and then we laugh, and then we talk about it. The second practice is to say yes, rather than "It's impossible."

The third practice is to say thank you. The grateful heart is open to wonder and expectation and God. Say thank you as often as you possibly can. And especially remember to say thank you when you have to do it through gritted teeth, at the times when you walk through the valley of darkness, when your heart has been broken, and your disappointment is like a bundle you carry. When you can find something to be thankful for especially in the terrible times, then your vision becomes a bit wider. It's a way to let God in.

The fourth practice is to make room in your life for listening. I do this by going for a walk at night in order to look at the stars. Try turning off the TV. Try doing a chore without background noise. When you make space in your life for listening, you will hear the whisper of God.

And finally, pay it forward. Don't keep all the blessings in your life to yourself. Share your abundance. This is the perfect time to go through your closets and pull out your extra sweaters and coats for the guests at the Off the Street Shelter. Act in kindness. Hold the door for a stranger. Offer a smile. Be generous with your time. Give some money without judgement or expectation. The fifth practice is about passing on the gifts we have been given because we remember that life is a gift unto itself.

"The kingdom of heaven is just like this..."

Let me end by telling you a story of how I experienced this sort of expectant waiting this week. When I look back at what happened, I realized that it contained pieces of all five of

the practices I just mentioned. It's a story about saying yes, re-framing words, offering gratitude, seeking stillness and paying it forward.

I was going about my ordinary work. For me, my ordinary is not like Brother Lawrence, peeling potatoes and washing dishes. I was visiting a member of the congregation. She had called me earlier in the week and invited me over for tea.

It didn't take long into the meeting, for me to realize that she had invited me to be a witness to a story she needed to share. The story she told was overflowing with hurt and sadness. Hers was a story of worst sort of betrayal. After she told me, we talked about how she might move forward, and at the end of our time together, I asked her if we might pray. Now, when I visit someone, I am always seeking out words, that will help me offer a prayer that will be helpful. In this case, the words that came to my mind were strength – she needed to be strong to make some necessary changes, and discernment – to find the right paths to walk down. Then I prayed for her broken heart, for its healing.

When I came to the end of the prayer, she started to pray. She prayed for the person who had hurt her. She prayed that he would be given strength to face the challenges in his life, that he would trust enough to walk in good paths, getting the help and support he needed, and then she prayed for his broken heart. After she said "Amen," I said "Wow." I told her that in 30 years of doing this, I had never heard someone pray in such an expansive way for the one who had hurt them.

She was puzzled by my remark. "Don't you think that he needs God just as much as I do?", she asked.

She was right. I thought to myself later how narrow my focus had been, how I had tried to limit the power of love and grace and renewal. I was reminded that the grace of God is so much bigger than my judgements. The holy is so much more. And at that moment of awakening, it felt for me, like being invited to a wedding, for I caught a glimpse of what God must surely dream for all of us – peace on earth, and good will to all people.

The kingdom of heaven is just like this...it's like a groom who shows up late for his wedding, and a monk who jots down snippets of kitchen conversations that go on to influence and change how people come to know Jesus in their lives. It is like a minister who doesn't get it, and a woman with a broken heart who does. It is about trying to live in ways that keep us open and seeking and above all else, making room with our waiting.

May the life you lead be a resounding "yes" to the invitation we have all been given.

Sources Used:

- ***The Practice of the Presence of God***, Brother Lawrence, various quotes.
- ***Embers***, Richard Wagamese, page 71.
- ***The Word Among Us: Reflections on the Readings of the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Vol. 3***, Herbert O'Driscoll.
- ***Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4***, pages 284-289.