

Going Along with the Crowd

Rev. Dewey Johnson, Pastor Emeritus

And while they went to buy oil, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. - Ending of Matthew 25:1-13

There are two foci during the Advent season. We look back to the birth of Jesus, and we look forward to the completion of his work, the Second Coming. The baby Jesus isn't enough when it comes to a Savior. Jesus has to grow up, teach humankind about God's nature, and die on the cross. He has to be resurrected so that we know his claims are true. His work has to continue in and through the church. He has to return in judgment and complete his work of salvation.

Our response to Jesus' Second Coming is not unlike the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids (above). You may want to read it again. Actually, the groom has already married the bride at her parents' home. What the people are waiting for is the beginning of the wedding feast, a wonderful affair at the groom's home, which lasts up to seven days and is paid for by the groom.

And all this takes place on Middle Eastern time. In other words, the wedding feast can start whenever the groom decides to show up, be it the night of the wedding or days later. What signals the start of the celebration is the promenade of the bride and groom from her house to his. And it appears to be the case that grooms loved to surprise the guests, whose task it is to line the road in welcome. And why are the guests willing to do this? These are people who consider themselves fortunate to eat one meal a day. But now it's feast time! It's important that they honor the one paying for the feast with an enthusiastic welcome.

The ten bridesmaids have been given a specific job, namely, carrying lamps to light the couple's way should they arrive at nighttime. But because five of them were not prepared – they did not have enough oil for their lamps – they weren't there when the bride and groom arrived. They were at the filling station getting a lamp lube. And although they knocked on the door when they returned, the groom replied, "I don't know you."

What this story is about is individual responsibility. Our job until Jesus' Second Coming is to be fully-alive human beings, people inspired and guided by the spirit, teachings, and example of Jesus. And what can prevent our being fully-alive, ready to respond? One thing, according to Soren Kierkegaard, is going along with the crowd. As Psalm 12 says, "Protect us, O Lord, guard us from this generation."

Kierkegaard wrote in an attempt to isolate people from crowd-think and crowd-do. Wrote to move them to self-examination, bring them as solitary individuals before God. Just as each of these bridesmaids has to account for having enough oil, so do we. But crowds of people, no matter how big or small, good or bad, are hiding places in which we as individuals feel at ease neglecting our responsibilities. *"Well," said the five bridesmaids. "At the last several weddings, the groom and bride came at dusk! We figured we didn't need much oil."*

Kierkegaard believed that we tend to not only go along with the crowd, but that we also try to get lost in the crowd and do things we would never do were we the sole

focus of God's piercing gaze. Other people can be a source of delusion to us, for no matter how hidden we think we are, all of us live fully in God's gaze and will be held accountable for all we have done or haven't done. That others are doing it, or condone it, is no excuse.

A fun example of individual responsibility. In 1789, the Connecticut House of Representatives was in session when the sky of Hartford suddenly became very dark. Several representatives looked out the window and feared that Jesus' return was at hand. (It was a much bigger public fear then than now.) Motions were made to adjourn. But the Speaker, a Col. Davenport, rose and said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching or not. If it is not, then there is no need for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty." He ordered that candles be brought into the room so the legislature could continue.