

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 25:1-13

“¹ Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

That opening litany made me think of a gentleman in the first congregation that I served. It was inevitable that no matter who was preaching, he always fell asleep during church and often times snored. He always chose to sit at the end of a pew, which became a problem when we built the new sanctuary and furnished it with chairs rather than pews. Sitting at the end of a row of chairs, he often had us watching and waiting for him to fall into the aisle after falling to sleep. Eventually, his wife, fearful this would actually happen, made him sit on the sofa in the narthex during worship. In today’s story told by Jesus, a group of women fell asleep complicating part of the group’s situation of being unprepared for a very important event.

For some of us, sleeping may not come easily these days. As I was preparing the message for this morning, I could not help but think to myself, “What a week this has been!” The uncertainties of the results of the election and the anxiety felt by many over how society would respond to the results seemed to pile on more ammunition pointed towards the year 2020 being a year worth forgetting. The COVID-19 pandemic, a struggling economy, massive destructive fires and floods, the widening of division in our nation, and the growing fear of terrorism has some Christians wondering if these are all signs of the end times and if Christ’s return is imminent.

As we turn to the gospel of Matthew, we can assume that he wrote this gospel for the people of his day who were remembering that Jesus said his return would be soon, so they were likely confused when Jesus did not show up in their time frame of “soon.” The confusion over the mystery of what “soon” meant only heightened as people read the book of Revelation—interpreting it to be clues or signs of the times signifying the end times and the return of Christ. Throughout history, people have construed that the times they are living through are so terrible that it must be the last days before Christ’s return. This is a foolish exercise in futility. The scriptures clearly state, as it does in verse thirteen of the scripture we read today, that no one knows and no one will ever be able to predict when Christ will return.

But the scriptures do speak of a day when Christ will return. We all will experience that day whether it is a glorious day when he comes for his faithful at one time, or when we meet him face to face when we move personally from our lives on this earth to a time and place in eternity.

With that in mind, let’s turn our attention to the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. It is one of four parables we find in chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew. These are recorded as Jesus’ final lessons as his ministry comes to a close. He imparts through these parables the most important

wisdom and direction he could possibly provide his disciples, to whom he was talking at the time—and to us.

You may remember that last Sunday we focused on a portion of Jesus' teachings at the beginning of his ministry, the Beatitudes, which are followed by many more teachings we group together and call his Sermon on the Mount. These mini sermons, if you will, give us instructions and descriptions of what it means to be a follower of Christ. We should not forget these earlier lessons as we entertain the messages of these closing parables.

The first parable, the "Faithful or Unfaithful Slave" at the end of chapter 24, deals with an unfaithful slave who assumes that his master will be delayed on his return from a trip indefinitely, and therefore feels free to behave unfaithfully. However, the master returns unexpectedly and punishes him, cutting him in pieces and relegating him to a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, which is our text for today, emphasizes the importance of being prepared for Christ's return. The third parable, the Parable of the talents, emphasizes the importance of being found by Christ at his coming and having been faithful over that which he has entrusted us. And the last, The Judgement of the Nations, which is not really a parable but an apocalyptic vision of the last judgement, emphasizes the importance of being found by Christ, at his return, to have been generous to "the least of these."

We will focus our attention today on the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids only. The story begins with the phrase: "Then the Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten virgins. The descriptors of the women as virgins and bridesmaids is used interchangeably between biblical interpretations.

Also, we might clarify any confusion about the two that the Kingdom of Heaven is essentially the same thing as the Kingdom of God. Matthew uses both in this Gospel but prefers kingdom of heaven because those he was expecting to read this were primarily Jewish, and Jews are reluctant to use God's name lest they use it wrongly.

The future tense, "will be," used in the story suggests the Kingdom of Heaven has something to do with the last days; but John the Baptist and Jesus have also told us that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near (Matthew 3:2; 10:7). This is true, in part, because Jesus personifies the kingdom of heaven—Emmanuel—God with us. It is also true because the kingdom is present in the heart of every person who makes God king in his/her life.

Weddings were, as they are today, a huge celebratory occasion. At a wedding, in the days of Jesus, the couple was the center of village life for days on end. After the marriage ceremony, there was feasting, dancing, and partying, which could last for several days. It was a great week for the couple, and for their friends as well—an event not to be missed.

An important part of the wedding ceremony was the procession from the home of the bride's parents to the couple's new home. As the bridegroom escorted his bride to their new home, their pathway was lit by wedding guests holding high flaming torches, probably sticks wrapped with oily rags.

A wedding was a great joy for all the members of the community, but particularly so for the young women invited to serve as the bride's attendants. It was an honor to be asked to participate, and those who agreed were expected to do so enthusiastically and responsibly. But something went awry in this story.

We are told that half of the bridesmaids were foolish. They had not prepared properly for their responsibilities. They did not have the foresight to take extra oil with them in case of any possible delays. The wise bridesmaids did have extra oil with them. They have lamps and oil and are set to greet the bridegroom no matter when he might arrive. We expect all the young women

to be ready because the bridegroom's coming will signal the beginning of a great and joyous festival—something that promises to be one of the highlights of these young women's lives.

In the story, there seems to be an unfortunate turn of events. The bridegroom is delayed. This is a key point. Both the wise and foolish bridesmaids are prepared for the bridegroom's coming, but only the wise bridesmaids are prepared for the bridegroom's delay. As I noted earlier, Matthew, writing this Gospel a half-century after the resurrection, is struggling with the issue of the delayed Second Coming.

The women get tired as darkness arrives and the day comes to a close, and so naturally, they fell asleep. But then at the unlikely time of midnight, the bridegroom arrives. The wise bridesmaids refill their darkened oil lamps to welcome the bridegroom. The foolish bridesmaids have no oil to refill their lamps and when they ask the wise women to share their oil, the wise women direct them to go shopping for more oil.

In the meantime, the wise bridesmaids enter the wedding celebration with the bridegroom and the door is shut behind them. When the foolish bridesmaids return with their filled lamps and knock on the door to enter to join the party, the bridegroom rejects them, stating he doesn't know them.

So, what then, do we learn from the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids? Is this a lesson of judgement, helping us to determine what is good and what is bad? There have been many sermons preached on this topic. Yet the text clearly assigns the action of judgement to the bridegroom—meaning Christ and not us.

Taking a closer look at the parable, we must note that all of the young women were waiting for the bridegroom. They all belonged to the same community, the same group of friends. They all fall asleep waiting for the bridegroom to come. Within this group of friends, it is impossible to tell who has enough oil in their lamps and who has been more faithful. They all knew who the bridegroom was.

My friends, the church, likewise, remains always a mixed community. We know who Jesus is and what he expects from us. The church waits for Christ's return. Some prepare for it; others do not. We all fall asleep at times. Within the church, it is difficult to know who has enough oil in their lamps to welcome Christ when he returns; so how can we or why should we judge one another. Only Christ's knows us, who we really are, and who is faithful and obedient to God's commands and call. Only Christ knows who has truly prepared for his return. This should give each of us pause as we might think we can fool others, and maybe even ourselves, but we can't fool God. And, being a member of a church does not guarantee we will be ready for Christ's return. Our faithfulness and obedience to God and God's will prepares us.

This parable is not first and foremost about judgement although a day of judgement will come. This parable places the responsibility for our faithfulness on us and the choices we make. Choices have consequences. Choosing to follow God changes everything. Choosing to share the wisdom of God's holy mystery with the next generation provides our children a chance at a real future. Choosing to remain vigilant keeps us ready when the bridegroom appears.

Today's parable reminds us that we need persistence, patience, and faithfulness for the long haul. But first and foremost, it reminds us that being prepared for our future meeting with Christ begins with the choices we make about whom will we serve?

Scott Adams, in his article, "The Dilbert Future: Thriving on Business Stupidity in the 21st Century," wrote this illustration about making choices for the future.

"What's the future look like? I'll tell you: It's about tough choices. For example, this morning I noticed that my electric razor had spilled its entire collection of whiskers all over the

inside of my fashionable leather toiletry bag. I had two choices. I could laboriously remove those whiskers, individually cleaning each of the other contents of the bag, thus missing at least an hour of useful work, or I could say to myself, ‘If I didn't mind having those whiskers on my face, why should I mind them on my little traveling aspirin bottle?’

“I chose the latter. After all, I already got used to the toothpaste all over everything in that bag. How bad could a few hairs be?”

“That's what the future looks like—a bag filled with toothpaste, whiskers, and unidentified containers. We're entering an age when the things we need to do and want to do are absorbed and overwhelmed by other things we need to do and want to do. We'll make random, often stupid choices because we don't have the brains or the time to do better.”

His use of the word stupid seems a bit harsh, but it is a synonym for foolish. The choices we make need to be grounded in the teachings of Christ and not swayed by fear, anxieties, and greed—the fallen whiskers and spilled toothpaste created by things of this world. Following Jesus cleans us up and clears the way for us to be prepared for when he comes for us. Will you be ready? Will your lamp be filled with oil to welcome him and at the same time shine a light on him for others to see?