

2023 Proper 27A

Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 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.' 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. 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."

What do we do with this parable?

I kind of love that the first response I usually hear when we discuss it is disgust at the selfishness of the five who wouldn't share. This is not what we want our kids to learn! It tells me that you really 'get' the whole love your neighbor thing (which does this priest's heart good!).

I reminded the Wednesday morning Bible study that there are plenty of people in this world who live by the creed "What's mine is mine. You should have planned better."

And there it is, that other word that bubbled up on Wednesday morning. Shame. I hadn't realized how many people hear this as a condemnation of their imperfections. "There doesn't seem to be any room to make a mistake," someone said. (Apparently for many this was also tied into human sexuality, as the word used in older translations is 'virgin.' I think that's a discussion for another day, but I do need to acknowledge that added layer for some of you, and just say, "Nope. That is not part of this story *at all*. Let it go.")

Selfishness. Shame. No room for forgiveness. How can these words possibly be coming out of *Jesus'* mouth?!

And then there's the whole "eschatology" thing—the writings about 'last things' or 'end times' which comes up about this time every year, as we anticipate the beginning of the new Church year in a couple of weeks when Advent begins.

That's where I want to come into this today. It's always important to think about the context and purpose of a passage of scripture. Too often we take a snippet out and treat it as some universal rule when it was often meant to be for a particular situation or audience.

This parable was meant for a group of people who had made the decision to follow Jesus even when things

were tough. The Gospels were written down a good 40-70 years after the events recorded there. No one was following Jesus around taking notes at the time he was speaking. So every story is passed through a filter of the person who remembered it, the person who is writing it down, and the people to whom it was written. It's easy to remember that the letters of the New Testament were written to a particular group of people going through a particular thing. But so were the gospels.

I've talked about this before, but the Gospel of Matthew was written to a community of Jesus followers who had Jewish roots, who had been pushed out of the religious communities where they had roots. This was traumatic for them in ways I don't think we can really understand. Add to that the sense of utter catastrophe that came from seeing the Temple in Jerusalem destroyed by the Roman armies, and maybe you can see why they might feel like they are living in the "end times." I imagine some of you feel that way yourselves sometimes, even today.

This desire for some relief is part of why they clung so tightly to the idea that Jesus would return in their lifetime. Jesus would set them free from their suffering, and confusion and fear.

This is the setting for eschatological imagery—words about the end times or times of total upheaval so that

everything that comes after feels like a whole new world. These are people who wanted some guidelines about how to get through to the other side of the turmoil, and who needed a word of hope to help them hang on.

They needed it two thousand years ago. I imagine some of you are just as hungry for it today.

As hard as it is for us to get our heads around, that is what apocalyptic literature is. It's HOPEFUL.

"But Nancy," I hear you saying, "Where is the HOPE in this story about these ten bridesmaids?!"

And I confess I had to spend a lot of time sitting with it, letting the things I had read and the conversations I have had about this story sink in and take some shape. I had to sit with the discomfort of it, of what I thought it said, of what I have been taught it said.

I had to wait until I reached the other side of it.

The last time I preached on this, during that first COVID winter, I told you how I was so proud of you for taking such good care of each other. You did everything you could to make sure everyone had what they needed. You were 'sharing your oil' so beautifully. And yet...

There are things we can only do for ourselves. I used the example of sleep. I have a friend who is chronically bad sleeper, and sometimes I wish I could just take some of my own restfulness and just infuse it into him. But I can't. It's something he can only do for himself.

Likewise, each of us is responsible for our own spiritual reserves. I can—and do—pray for you. But my prayers are not going to fill your spiritual oil jar. You need to take that time to stop, reflect, give thanks, be in awe...to experience the presence of God first-hand.

I needed to repeat that insight because the last time I preached it, we were still doing Zoom church and only about 15 of you heard it.

But this year's reflection on this passage threw a new and different light on it.

I kept going back to the issue of shame that someone raised on Wednesday. One of the commentaries I read came at it sideways—there was still a bit of shaming happening, I have to say—but she asked, “What would have happened if they had run out of oil? Would it really have been that catastrophic?” She was suggesting that perhaps the problem was their own pride getting in the way. If they had not assumed they were “prepared” or if they had been willing to admit their mistake earlier they would have had time to get ready.

What if the point of the story is to think creatively about the problem?

What if, rather than trying to pretend they had everything under control, or could get everything under control, they just ‘fessed up. Yep, we don’t have enough oil. What if they asked the five who were there not to share their oil with them, but to share their light with them? What if they quenched their own lamps for those long dark hours, and sat in the glow of another person’s light? (Hat tip to Patty Watts—what you said really did sink in!)

This may, on the surface, feel like a contradiction to what I was saying before. But on a deeper level, I think it may help us shake off that layer of shame and take us to a place of really being in communion with one another. Maybe we don’t each have to do every single thing perfectly. Maybe we can instead light one person’s lamp for this hour, and then use her flame to light someone else’s, and let hers rest for a bit. Each of us knowing what we can contribute to keep the light shining, without carrying the burden of thinking we have to do it all ourselves.

This idea was beginning to take shape in my mind as I started the Zoom Compline Thursday evening, so when

we said the following, I literally stopped and took a deep breath.

It is but lost labour that we haste to rise up early,
and so late take our rest, and eat the bread of anxiety.
For those beloved of God are given gifts
even while they sleep.

To close I want to share with you another selection from the form of Night Prayer we used this week. I have made copies for you to take home with you, so that you can say it as you go to bed. May it bring you peace and hope as you allow yourselves to let go of the worries of the world and rest in the loving presence of God.
Lord, it is night.

The night is for stillness.
Let us be still in the presence of God.

It is night after a long day.
What has been done has been done;
what has not been done has not been done;
let it be.

The night is dark.
Let our fears of the darkness of the world
and of our own lives rest in you.

The night is quiet.
Let the quietness of your peace enfold us,
all dear to us,

and all who have no peace.

The night heralds the dawn.

Let us look expectantly to a new day,

new joys,

new possibilities.

In your name we pray. **Amen.**

From A New Zealand Prayer Book