

Matthew 25:1-13
11/12/17—Pentecost 23A

Psalm 78:1-7
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Shining Your Light

Laura's wedding is next weekend. Ever since she was in college, Laura has been a special friend. Laura sings like an angel. Laura has heard God calling her to pastoral ministry, and she has said *yes* to that call. Laura's now serving three lowcountry churches in our South Carolina Conference.

One summer, when Laura was working at a Salkehatchie camp, she met Jeff, her husband-to-be. Laura and Jeff are being married this Saturday at a historic church on Meeting Street in Charleston. It's going to be a beautiful, traditional wedding. Laura's dad will walk her down the aisle. Laura will probably have several attendants. But you know, I don't think she'll have *ten* bridesmaids.

In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, we hear a story about a wedding with ten bridesmaids. Now first-century wedding customs are quite a bit different from our own. Most weddings would be great festivals lasting up to a week. The whole village would party!

Before the wedding, there'd be a celebratory processional, beginning at the home of the bridegroom's parents and ending at the wedding site. And that's the case with this particular wedding. The bridegroom, accompanied by his friends, is reported to be on his way. And ten bridesmaids are going out to meet him.

The thing is, it's the time of the new moon. It's pitch black dark. And there are no street lights. So each of these ten young women is carrying an oil lamp.

Do you have any oil lamps at your house? Bob and I have a couple of them. They come in really handy when there's a loss of electrical power. But you have to be sure you have enough oil. Or you'll be left in the dark.

Jesus tells us that of these ten bridesmaids, five are wise. These five take an extra container of oil along with them. But the other five—he says—are foolish. The only oil they have is the oil that's already in their lamps.

Because these five thought they knew when the bridegroom would come. They weren't figuring on the bridegroom taking a long time to get there. All ten bridesmaids get tired waiting for him. At midnight, when the bridegroom finally arrives, the

lamps of the five foolish ones have gone out. To light the way to meet him, they have to rush off to buy more oil. And when they get back, the door's closed. They can't get in. They've missed out. The bridegroom has come, and the wedding banquet has begun.

So. What are we supposed to think about this parable that we find only in Matthew's Gospel? It seems pretty simple and straightforward.

But isn't that how it is with the parables of Jesus? They're about everyday people. They contain images that were familiar to his first listeners and seem familiar to us, too. At first glance, Jesus' parables *do* seem pretty simple and straightforward, don't they? That is, until we turn them around and begin to look at them from another angle.

When we do, we find that there's more to them than we first thought.

And this odd story is no exception. Like many others, this is a parable that puzzles and perplexes. That leaves us with some unanswered questions.

We see in a mirror dimly. There is much that we don't know.

What we *do* know is that Jesus offers this parable near the end of his earthly life, near the end of the Gospel. We know that as we hear it, we stand near the end of this Christian year. So we're not surprised that this story has to do with end times.

And we know that this is more than just a story about a wedding. There's a deeper level of meaning at play here. The bridesmaids are us. The church. The bridegroom is Jesus. And the arrival of the bridegroom is the Second Coming of Christ.

You know that in the first years after Jesus was raised and ascended, his followers expected him to return very soon. Any day. Starry-eyed believers spent their time gazing up into the heavens, awaiting his coming. Rather than being about the work he had charged them with.

By the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, believers had begun to realize that some time would pass before Jesus comes again. And ever since, people have been trying to pinpoint when that would happen.

According to some, we're living in the end times right now. In the headlines, we read of earthquake, flood, and fire: natural disasters in Houston, in Florida, in Mexico, in Puerto Rico, in northern California. We hear news reports of horrific acts of evil

in Las Vegas, in Paris, in London, in New York, in Texas. And threats of terrifying weapons of mass destruction. Sometimes we feel as though we —like those bridesmaids—are in the middle of a long, dark night.

And some—like a number of first-century believers—figure that if life as we know it is about to end, why bother doing deeds of love and mercy? Why be concerned with seeking justice for the oppressed? Or with caring for this fragile planet called earth? Or with striving for real and lasting peace among neighbors and nations?

People continue to predict the end of the world. Like those five mistaken bridesmaids, some think they know the time. But when you hear such prophecies, I invite you to consider two things. The first is that every single prediction that has been made has proven incorrect. The second is that Jesus has declared that God alone knows the day and the hour. Not you. Not me. Not even Jesus himself.

The One who has foretold his return. But it's been two thousand years. Many have concluded that after twenty centuries, it's not going to happen and there's no point in waiting any longer. They're at the opposite end of the spectrum from

those who believe that the end is imminent. Yet both views lead to the supposition that human creatures might just as well live for the moment and *in* the moment and do as they darn well please.

But, my sisters and brothers, throughout Christian history, the church has read in this story a cautionary word: *Don't become complacent. You don't know the time. Be ready. Be prepared.*

Be prepared. You've heard these words all your life—right? Your parents said them. Your teachers said them. And if you were a Boy Scout, you heard them for sure, because that's the motto of the Boy Scouts of America. "Be prepared." Now I was never a Boy Scout. But I'm told that Boy Scouts prepare by learning life skills. Like how to survive in the wilderness. Like how to take care of themselves and others. Boy Scouts get to earn merit badges, too. My spouse was a Boy Scout. He had a first aid kit. He earned several merit badges. If you ask him, he might be able to tell you what all of them were for. But I *do* know—and report with a grateful heart— that one of them was in cooking.

Be prepared. How do you and I prepare? These same two millennia have passed for the community who follow Jesus. For us. The waiting has been long. We live between past and future, in the “present, suspended between memory and hope.” We live in the time between the times: the time of the incarnate One and the time of his return in glory.

This is the very One who wants us to know that “the foolish [take] only enough oil for their own timetable,” in the words of one interpreter. But we put our trust in another timetable. We prepare according to a radically different timetable: the timetable of the One who reigns over a kingdom in which the wise bring enough for the long haul. Enough oil for your lamps.

Jesus wants to be sure you understand that this oil for your lamps is faith. *And* this oil for your lamps is the acts of love and mercy that flow freely and naturally *out* of faith.

So fill your lamps, beloved, and pack an extra portion of oil—an extra measure of faith—to take on your journey. Faith is God’s gift to you, God’s gift of grace. All along the way, faith needs to be replenished. All along the way, your lamp needs to be refilled. Carry faith with you—and within you—to make sure your light doesn’t go out. Let it shine!

You shine your light when you witness to your faith.

You shine your light when you share your story and when you tell the story of which your story is a part.

You shine your light when—as the psalmist sings—you *teach [your] children, that the next generation might know...so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God.*

You shine your light when you put your faith into action.

You shine your light when you serve God by loving God's children with acts of caring and kindness.

You shine your light when you choose to serve the One who protects you all along the way.

You shine your light when you choose to serve the One who has done great signs in your sight.

You shine your light when you choose to serve the Lord.

You shine your light when you promise to serve your Lord until the end.

You shine your light when you proclaim the good news that his promises are true!

You shine your light when you take with you enough oil, enough faith, to light the way to meet the Bridegroom who is coming.

For you are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.