

Twenty-Fourth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): "Silly or Smart?"

Amos 5:18-24; Matthew 25:1-13

November 11-12, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

This is quite a story that Jesus tells. We could call it "a parable with teeth." I invite you to listen closely as I read it again, this time the contemporary version from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*:

[Jesus said:] ¹⁻⁵ "God's kingdom is like ten young virgins who took oil lamps and went out to greet the bridegroom. Five were silly and five were smart. The silly virgins took lamps, but no extra oil. The smart virgins took jars of oil to feed their lamps. The bridegroom didn't show up when they expected him, and they all fell asleep.

⁶ "In the middle of the night someone yelled out, 'He's here! The bridegroom's here! Go out and greet him!'

⁷⁻⁸ "The ten virgins got up and got their lamps ready. The silly virgins said to the smart ones, 'Our lamps are going out; lend us some of your oil.'

⁹ "They answered, 'There might not be enough to go around; go buy your own.'

¹⁰ "They did, but while they were out buying oil, the bridegroom arrived. When everyone who was there to greet him had gone into the wedding feast, the door was locked.

¹¹ "Much later, the other virgins, the silly ones, showed up and knocked on the door, saying, 'Master, we're here. Let us in.'

¹² "He answered, 'Do I know you? I don't think I know you.'

¹³ "So stay alert. You have no idea when he might arrive." (Matthew 25)

So what **questions** do you have about this parable of the ten maidens, or what **reactions** does it trigger in you? (It generated terrific discussion at our lectionary study with St. Denis friends on Wednesday!)

- I'm thinking you'll mention the detail of the bridesmaids who won't share their oil! (Shocking lack of charity ☺, right?) Here are a couple of explanations:
 - a. "...there are certain things that can't be borrowed... A [person] cannot borrow a relationship with God; he [or she] must possess it for him[or her]self."¹ I can't want your communion with Christ more than you do....
 - b. "Of a truth [God's] grace is free... But it is not a gift [that doesn't require a] response on the [person]'s part. Each [person] must receive and appropriate it... We need no money with which to buy [it]: we need bring only our pathetic lack and longing. But nobody can go for us."²
- Another shocker: "*Truly I tell you, I do not know you.*" (Matt. 25:12) These are not words we **ever** want to hear from our Lord. In them we hear echoes of Matt. 7:21:
"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

Robert Capon is a Scripture scholar who wrote this:

“[Jesus] does not say, ‘I never called you.’ He does not say, ‘I never loved you.’ He does not say, ‘I never drew you to myself.’ He only says, ‘I never knew you – because you never bothered to know me.’”³

Capon concludes:

“The whole point of the parable: some day, late or soon, it will be too late even to believe. We become what we do. If we trust, we become trusters, and we enter into the sure possession of him whom we trust. If we distrust, we become distrusters and close out the only relationship with reality ever offered to us.”⁴

This year for the first time I noticed that the bride is absent from the story. (Maybe this is because there is now a bride-in-waiting in our family!) The bride’s presence is assumed, for sure, but she makes no explicit appearance. In our culture the wedding is pretty much all about the bride, right? But in 1st century Palestine, in Jesus’ culture, things were flipped. Instead of the groom waiting anxiously for the bride at the altar, in those days the bride waited to be retrieved from her familial home by the groom. **This groom is running late.** Keeping with the wedding metaphor, maybe the trolley car broke down. Maybe the bridge was up ☺. Maybe the vintage car rented especially for this occasion broke down. (At 1 time or another, these have all been reasons for Holy Trinity brides to arrive late!) More worrisome, maybe somebody got sick. And in the mind of the groom awaiting the arrival of his tardy bride, in the heart of the groom becoming more anxious by the minute, grows the fear that the bride has had second thoughts and now has cold feet, Heaven forbid!

In this parable the bride must not be in too much of a panic about the groom’s non-appearance, though, because she and the gaggle of girls accompanying her fall asleep rather than growing owl-eyed with worry. They have reason to trust he’ll appear eventually because this groom is completely trustworthy; he represents Jesus Himself. The bridesmaids are stand-ins for all of us who claim Jesus as Lord and who await His return. The point of the parable is Jesus counseling us, *“Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour”* [of My return]. Simply put, Jesus advises: *“So stay alert. You have no idea when [I] might arrive.”* (Matt. 25:13) Sure ‘nuff.

There’s no lack of people who point to this decade’s bounty of natural disasters, national upheavals, international crises, to say, “It’s a sure sign the Lord is coming back soon. These things were foretold. Just look at the Book of Revelation!” Lemme just say it’s not so easy to read and interpret the

Book of Revelation. It's called "apocalyptic" literature. That means "veiled," "hidden." Apocalyptic lit is written to encourage the faithful in times of persecution. It used code language so that the person caught reading it would be less likely to be arrested and killed. And most importantly, Jesus Himself said this to His disciples about His coming again in glory:

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (Matthew 24:1)

If Jesus didn't know, how could we??

"So stay alert. You have no idea when [I] might arrive." (Matt. 25:13)

Jesus is both inviting and warning us to be well-prepared for His arrival, "whenever." Two thousand years ago He was already urging His followers to be patient about the delay of His return. Then and now the Holy Spirit encourages and enables those who claim Him as Lord to use well the time between the promise and its fulfilment.

In Jewish tradition, oil (including oil in lamps) is often symbolic of good deeds. The oil of the wise maidens in this parable has been seen as representing "deeds of love and mercy...."⁵ 'Sounds like in order to be prepared for our Lord's return we need to be busy in service rather than passive in waiting or paralyzed by fear ! (When the Lord comes, will He be happier to find us serving our neighbor or scanning the skies with binoculars for His return ☺?) In a couple of weeks we'll be celebrating Christ the King, the end of the church year, and our Gospel will be the parable of the sheep and the goats: *"I was hungry and you fed me... I was sick and you visited me... I was homeless and you sheltered me."* These end time parables about Jesus' eventual return in judgment and glory aren't as much about right belief as they're about right action. **How are we living out our faith?** Not only by worshiping but also by serving the other 6 days each week. *"Whenever you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me."* (Matt. 25:40) To quote Holy Trinity's tag line, our faith family's motto: **Is our faith active in love?** Are we heeding the Lord's command through the prophet Amos in today's first lesson, that we *"let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream"*? (Amos 5:24)

The Bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, has promised to return, and He is good for His word. A beautiful invitation to receive Holy Communion is, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb,” a reference we find in the Book of Revelation. The only signs of the times we need to track are the needs of those who suffer and how we who are greatly blessed can alleviate their suffering in the present, and work to prevent it, going forward. Jesus is **already** among us: the living Word alive and present in the written Word and in the preached Word, wherever two or more are gathered in His name, in the living waters of Baptism, in the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion, in the last, the lost and the least.

When He comes to us or we go to Him, may there be deep trust in our hearts that our Savior has done everything necessary for us to be with Him forever. May there also be the oil of faith-active-in-love burning bright in our lamps, as the Light of the world comes to illumine the darkness and scatter all shadows. Amen

¹William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2 (rev. ed., Daily Study Bible series, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 320.

²*Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 7 (NY: Abingdon, 1951), pp. 557-558.

³Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 165.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 450.

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