

Pentecost +26 - Year A
9 November 2008
Saint Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri

Matthew 25:1-13

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love.
AMEN.

The parable in today's gospel is one of several parables in Matthew's gospel about weddings. Now, one thing we all know about a wedding is that the time leading up to a wedding can be both joyous and stressful at the same time.

In the time of Jesus, marriage customs were different from those in our day. But, just as an approaching wedding is joyous now, I'm sure it was joyous then. And, just as the time leading up to a wedding can be stressful now, it was probably stressful then. So many preparations to make. So much expectation.

In today's gospel, the focus of the wedding story that Jesus told was ten bridesmaids.

And, as Jesus told the story, these ten young women had gathered at the location where the wedding would take place, awaiting the arrival of the groom with his friends and family. Each of these bridesmaids had a lamp with her to be sure she could see in the darkness of the evening. Each was no doubt looking forward to seeing the bridegroom when he arrived to marry their friend and anticipating the party that would celebrate their union.

I'm guessing that, if weddings then were anything like weddings now, these young women had been busy all day, maybe they'd been busy for several days, helping the bride prepare for this momentous event.

There had been many things to do – making sure the wedding clothes were ready and packing for the bride to leave her family's home. There had been much conversation and laughter to share – stories about when

they had been girls growing up together in the village and what it would be like to have husbands and children of their own.

Perhaps there had even been a bit of sorrow that their friend would soon be a married woman with all the responsibilities that come with marriage. Perhaps the bride would be leaving their village to move into her new husband's family home in another place. Yes, maybe there was even a little sorrow that their relationship with the bride would no longer be quite the same. Joy and stress – all intermingled together.

Now, with this intermingling of joy and stress – five of the young women had still planned ahead for the coming of the bridegroom. They surely didn't want to miss a moment of the happy event. So, they made sure, even in the busy-ness of all the activities leading up to the wedding, that they had some extra oil for their lamps. Just in case. Because they didn't want to miss a single moment of the bridegroom's arrival or the party later.

The other five bridesmaids – well, they must have gotten all caught up in the activities of the day, the packing and conversation and thoughts of the future. Maybe time got away from them, maybe they just weren't paying attention and got forgetful, maybe the stress of the day got to them. Maybe they were so fixated on dreaming of the handsome bridegroom and the fun of the party that they just got lost in their thoughts. Whatever the reason, these five didn't get any extra oil for their lamps.

After such a busy few days of preparing and packing, the bridesmaids, must have been tired, even with, maybe especially with, all the excitement of a wedding. So, when the hour got late and the bridegroom still hadn't arrived, all ten fell asleep.

Suddenly, at midnight, they heard a shout, "Look! The bridegroom's here. It's time for the wedding. The party is about to begin."

And, in the darkness of the night, shaking off their sleep, all ten excitedly grabbed for their lamps. But, as they lifted their lamps, all ten realized that the hour had grown late while they were sleeping, the night was dark, and the lamps had already been burning for some time. The weight of those lamps in their hands told them that the oil in their lamps was about to run out.

And, you heard the rest of the story. The five who had brought extra oil had plenty of oil with them so they were able to keep their lamps going. They had no worries about greeting the bridegroom and enjoying the wedding festivities.

The other five – those who had not brought any extra lamp oil – they tried to make a last minute run to the local 24-hour lamp oil shop to get some extra oil. Unfortunately, by the time they found the store, made the purchase, and got back, the door to the party had already been shut, the wedding festivities had begun, and they had missed it.

Now, while some of Jesus' parables are a little hard to figure out, this one seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it? It seems clear that the moral to this story is "Be prepared."

But, if we think about it for a moment, we might ask, "Be prepared for what?"

Well, many folks have interpreted this parable to say, "Be prepared for the return of Christ – the bridegroom - at the last day."

And, while I don't disagree with that interpretation, I think that if that's all we think it says, then we might be missing something.

Let's go back to the beginning of the story. Jesus began the parable with these words,

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this...

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this...

“The kingdom of heaven” is a phrase we’ve heard many times in Matthew’s gospel. You see the writer of the Gospel put a conflict at the heart of his message. It was the conflict between the kingdom of God - that is, the kingdom of heaven - and the kingdom of the world.

This conflict was put into play when the kingdom of God literally broke into the kingdom of the world with the advent, the birth, of the messianic king, Jesus of Nazareth – bringing the kingdom of heaven right along with him into the world.

Back in Chapter 4 of the Gospel, Jesus had begun his preaching ministry by saying “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” The kingdom of heaven wasn’t only some far-off future event or situation. No, the kingdom of God, with Jesus’ birth, the coming of incarnate God in human flesh, was already a present reality. A present reality because Jesus had come into the world.

So let’s go back to the moral of today’s parable about the ten bridesmaids. Be prepared. Be prepared for Jesus. Be prepared for Christ at the last day, to be sure.

But, also, be prepared for Jesus as a present reality in our world today.

Be prepared, because Jesus will come to you in unexpected ways, at unexpected times. Jesus will come into your darkness, when you can’t see the road ahead of you and you have no idea where to go, when you are lost and alone. Jesus will speak your name and say the things that no one else cares enough about you to say. Jesus will show you where to go and lead you to places of light and life.

Be prepared. When you don’t see any purpose or meaning for your life, when you’re wondering why you were created. Jesus will come to you with tasks that at first seem impossible for you to do. Jesus will

come to you in the faces of those in need and give you purpose and meaning. Jesus will call your name and show you why you were created.

Be prepared. Make sure you have plenty of oil for your lamp. You can't wait until the last minute, and you can't borrow this kind of oil from others. You don't want to miss a moment. You don't want to miss the bridegroom.

You see if we focus too much on preparing for meeting Jesus at the last day, I think we very well may risk missing the ways that Jesus is active and moving as a present reality all around us. In fact, how better to be prepared for Jesus at the last day than to be prepared for meeting him each day and every day. Praising Jesus, resting in him, serving him – praying that our lamps are always full of the oil of God's mercy and grace. Oil that can cause our lamps to burn bright – so that we can see Jesus active and a live all around us, so that we can be the light of the world as he promised.

Now, sometimes the most profound theological insight seems to come to us in the most simple words and thoughts – at least that's how it seems to work for me. And, I'm sure you know by now that many times I hear the voice of God most clearly and plainly in music. As I was working on this sermon, the words of an old gospel song came into my head. It's a song that some of you may know, maybe you sang it as a child.

And, as I remembered the lyrics of this song, I realized that these simple words say exactly what I want to leave you with this morning. This simple gospel song encapsulates for me what I hope our prayer will be as we read about the five bridesmaids who were prepared to see the bridegroom. So, I'm going to ask you to help me conclude the sermon today by singing this song with me. I'll sing the first verse, then you can join in as we repeat the first verse and then sing the rest of the song.

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning
Give me oil in my lamp, I pray
Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning
Keep me burning 'til the break of day

Sing hosanna, sing hosanna
Sing hosanna to the King of Kings
Sing hosanna, sing hosanna
Sing hosanna to the King of Kings

Give me joy in my heart, keep me praising
Give me joy in my heart, I pray
Give me joy in my heart, keep me praising
Keep me praising 'til the break of day

Sing hosanna, sing hosanna
Sing hosanna to the King of Kings
Sing hosanna, sing hosanna
Sing hosanna to the King of Kings

Give me peace in my heart, keep me resting
Give me peace in my heart, I pray
Give me peace in my heart, keep me resting
Keep me resting 'til the break of day

Sing hosanna, sing hosanna
Sing hosanna to the King of Kings
Sing hosanna, sing hosanna
Sing hosanna to the King of Kings

Give me love in my heart, keep me serving
Give me love in my heart, I pray
Give me love in my heart, keep me serving
Keep me serving 'til the break of day

Sing hosanna, sing hosanna
Sing hosanna to the King of Kings
Sing hosanna, sing hosanna
Sing hosanna to the King of Kings

Give us oil in our lamps, keep us burning – so that we can be prepared see Jesus, the bridegroom. May this
always be our prayer. AMEN.