

Proper 27A 2017 Sermon

Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten virgins 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 virgins 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 virgins 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."

The setting is the Mount of Olives, just outside of Jerusalem, a few short days before Jesus will be crucified. His earthly ministry is ending, and here on the Mount of Olives he gives his disciples an extended teaching, just as he had done on *another* mountain at the *beginning* of his ministry, in what we call his "Sermon on the Mount." Today's parable, from this *second* "Sermon on the Mount," is set at a wedding, with 10 virgins (that's the *literal* translation, not "bridesmaids") waiting for the Bridegroom.

Now, it's an admittedly *difficult* parable. The parable itself has some logical inconsistencies. For instance, if the oil in the parable represents "good deeds," as most interpreters surmise, then why would the foolish maidens be sent to the store to buy more oil? Can good deeds be bought at a store? And in Jesus' concluding statement, which we *assume* is "the moral of the story," Jesus says, "Keep awake therefore;" but in the parable both the wise AND the foolish virgins go to sleep – *neither* stays awake!

So what are we to make of this parable?

We can begin by noting that Jesus introduces the parable by saying, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this..." Now, we have learned from many other places where Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven that it is far more than just a place good people go to when they die. The kingdom of heaven is a state of consciousness, a mindset, which resonates with Jesus' *own* consciousness and mindset. "Have this mind in you that was in Christ Jesus," St. Paul famously exhorted the Philippians.¹ The kingdom of heaven is a spiritual state which vibrates at the same frequency as Jesus' spirit. We live in the kingdom of heaven when we live out of the same consciousness and mindset as Christ, and our actions flow from that same place. When we live "in Christ," to use the phrase St. Paul uses 164 times,² then we find we have a spiritual Source – symbolized by the

extra oil of the wise virgins – to draw upon when circumstances in our life become difficult or when what we hope and long for never seems to come. In our parable, these difficult life circumstances and delayed hope are symbolized by the fact that the bridegroom – Christ – is so delayed in coming, and night has fallen.

At the darkest moment, the Bridegroom arrives. Fr. John Shea notes: “It is time for the lamps to give light so the virgins can see the bridegroom and the bridegroom can see the virgins. In the mutual seeing they will recognize one another. However, the lamps can only shine if they have oil. The foolish have no oil and ask to borrow some. The wise refuse for seemingly [selfish] reasons. They appear to be looking out for themselves rather than sharing with those in need. Instead, they suggest to the foolish that they ‘go... and buy’ some oil.”³

But it is not that the wise virgins are selfish and refuse to share their oil; it’s that it simply *cannot be done* – and not only because it is the middle of the night and the stores are closed. Each of the wise virgins’ flasks of oil symbolizes her own distinctive inner connection to the Source of eternal life. Each of the foolish virgins must find her **own** unique connection to this Source. Fr. John Shea puts it this way: “The truth of oil is: you have to have your own. ...One cannot develop spiritually by taking the consciousness and action of another as your own.”⁴ Yet we persistently seek to buy or borrow things “out there” when we don’t believe we have them “in here.” We think that the answer to a problem arising in our soul or our spirit can be solved by obtaining something from *outside* ourselves. But if having extra oil symbolizes having access to that never-ending flow of life that comes when we live *in Christ*, in the kingdom of heaven – then this is **not** something that can be obtained from outside one’s self. It *has* to come from within. We find the same symbolism in the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. “In the... Gospel of Mark (6:30-44), the disciples tell Jesus to send the crowds away so they can ‘go . . . and buy’ (v. 36) food themselves. When Jesus tells **them** to provide the food, the disciples say, ‘Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to [all these people] to eat?’ (v. 37). Jesus directs them to *their own inner resources*, but they **insist** that the only place they can get food is *outside* themselves.”⁵ The kind of food Jesus wants the disciples to give the people can no more be bought at a store than can the kind of oil the foolish virgins lack.

Henri Nouwen, the 20th Century priest, scholar, and author of many books on life in the spirit, was visiting a monastery for an extended time when a request came from a nearby church. The church leaders had heard that the great Henri Nouwen was close by; would he please come speak with them while he was in the area? Fr. Nouwen responded that it would be impossible, since he would not have time to prepare. But the abbot of the monastery said to him, “Henri, you have been here, praying and centering yourself, for weeks! What better preparation is there? You need to go speak to those people. You have all you need.”

Now, I can really identify with Fr. Nouwen. For, if I am going to preach or teach, I feel like I have to gather all my outside resources: commentaries, different Bible translations, word studies, and on and on. Consult all the outside experts, and then share THEIR wisdom and insights with the congregation or the class.

Now such preparation isn't a bad thing; it can be very helpful and enlightening! But if this is ALL that I am doing in preparing for a sermon or a class, it is very easy for it to become a process that remains totally *external* to me, and therefore remains external to my listeners – to you. Intellect speaks to intellect; spirit speaks to spirit. If I am preaching or teaching from my own life experience, my own heart space, my own spirit, then there is a better chance that **your** hearts and spirits will hear, and resonate with, what I am trying to communicate.

Henri Nouwen took to heart what that abbot said to him. He later wrote: “Now I see that I was all mixed up... The question is not, ‘Do I have time to prepare?’ but, ‘Do I live in a state of preparedness?’”⁶ Do I live in a state of preparedness? If Fr. Nouwen has been faithful in his daily prayer practice, intentionally trying to be present to the God who wants more than anything to be close to him, then he lives in a *state* of preparedness. The *wise* virgins in our parable live in such a state of spiritual preparedness – they have what they need; they draw on that endless source of life symbolized by the extra oil. Whether **physically** awake or sleeping, their *spirits* are awake, and that's what counts. The *foolish* virgins do not live in a state of spiritual preparedness. *Their* consciousness, their mindset is **not** the consciousness or mindset of Christ, and therefore Christ the bridegroom does not recognize them when they came knocking. Like recognizes like. Fr. Shea notes that “Right to the end the foolish [virgins] think that it is Jesus... who will open the door for them. They do not understand that the kingdom of heaven has been passed on to them, and the door only opens when *they* have the ability to open it for themselves. It is the lamp of their consciousness burning from [the oil that flows unceasingly through their hearts through the indwelling Holy Spirit] that will open the door.” In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, “The kingdom of God isn't something you can see. There is no use saying, ‘Look! Here it is’ or ‘Look! There it is.’ The kingdom of God is within you.”⁸

The kingdom of God (or in Matthew's language, “the kingdom of heaven,”) is within us. What we need to do is to recognize it, uncover it, and unite our mind, soul, and spirit with it. If we truly **mean** it when we pray, “**Thy** kingdom come,” then the necessary corollary is, “**My** kingdom go.” But our human egos have a difficult time letting go of “**my** kingdom.” Yet that's what the **wise** virgins have done: they have let go of their *own* kingdom so that they might be united with the bridegroom in *his* kingdom. They realize that life *with* the bridegroom is infinitely better than life *without* the bridegroom. In the mystical symbolism of the parable, the five **wise** virgins are ready to marry the bridegroom, to give themselves to him.

My friends, our Christ Church mission statement is: “Love God. Love your neighbor. Change the world.” It starts with loving God. And we *grow* in our love of God as we open ourselves, more and more, to the kingdom of heaven which is within us. But “**my** kingdom come” tends to shout at us louder than “**thy** kingdom come,” so it takes disciplined practice to listen to the voice of the kingdom of heaven within. Time spent in silence and prayer, allowing God’s presence to seep into our consciousness, changing it more and more into the consciousness of Christ.

My friends, if you do not already have a regular practice of silence and prayer, I encourage you to start one – perhaps as an Advent commitment to the Christ-Child. I can help you start such a practice, or Linda or Mike or pb or Nancy or Carol Ann or Bryan or John Metz or any of the people in our Centering Prayer group. Next Sunday, there will be Advent devotional booklets for you to take home which will help you in developing your practice of daily prayer. Having a regular practice of silent prayer builds up in our soul a supply of oil that will be there even in the times of darkness and absence. It helps us be wise, rather than foolish.

AMEN

¹ Philippians 2:5

² Richard Rohr’s daily email meditation, “Life as Participation,” Thursday, May 18, 2017

³ John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 315

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 315

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 315

⁶ Henri Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday & Company, 1976, p. 59

⁷ Shea, *ibid.*, p. 316

⁸ Luke 17:20-21