

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, November 12, 2023 // Proper 27, Year A

The Gospel: 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."

Background and general observations

Although early church tradition has it that the author of this Gospel was Matthew, the tax collector, who was a disciple of Jesus, most scholars today believe that this Gospel was written by an Israelite man between 80 and 90 AD. It might be noted that the Gospel According to Matthew seems to have been written for a Jewish audience. Jesus is the authoritative interpreter of Moses and the promised messianic king of Israel. For some scholars, this parable serves as an important point of study in the relations between Matthew's community and the Jewish community surrounding it; the conflict is focused on the acceptance of the apocalyptic nature of Christ's return by Matthew's community and the rejection of it by the surrounding Jewish community.

In this week which follows All Saints' Sunday (where we contemplate and celebrate all the company of heaven), it makes sense that we turn our attention to a return, a breaking in of the Kingdom of Heaven. In chapter 25, we have three major parables about this coming of the Son of Man, the "second coming." The first (the parable of the ten bridesmaids) and the third (the parable of the sheep and goats—"as you did to the least of these...") are found only in Matthew's Gospel. The second of the three, the parable of the talents (vv. 14-30), is also found in Luke's Gospel. The setting in the parable of the ten bridesmaids is the return—or coming—of the groom (with his new bride) to his father's house. The task of the bridesmaids is to welcome the bride and groom when they arrive.

This passage heralds Advent's message, reminding us of Jesus' regular admonition to be prepared, wakeful, spiritually attentive, and available for the revelation of God or the breaking in of the Kingdom. We are being prompted to get ready to get ready; that is, we are to "keep awake" if we are to participate fully in the Kingdom of God. Since so many today are overly busy, preoccupied, multi-tasking and worn out, there might be a number of ways in which this Gospel lesson connects with people's everyday lives. The parable may have us considering, for example, the symbolic implications concerning having plenty of oil versus not having enough, in storing up what we know we need versus pleading in desperation for what we should have cared more about, in being "spiritually prepared" and equipped in faith versus being haphazard or even dismissive in tending to a relationship with God. Or, this parable may prod us to reflect on the importance and value of a spiritual life: how might we be more intentional about, and attentive to, matters of the soul? The theme of spiritual attention will continue throughout the season of Advent, and as the liturgical year draws to a close.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. This parable raises several questions concerning themes of preparation, maturation, and attentiveness. To start, you might consider how the wise bridesmaids respond to the request of the ones who were not prepared, and how the bridegroom in turn responds to the bridesmaids who show up too late. What might their responses say about dismissal, last-minute appeals and desperation versus ongoing relationship in hope and faith? If Jesus's teaching in this case is a warning of some kind, how might you articulate what's at the heart of this lesson?
2. It might be helpful to step into the shoes of the tardy bridesmaids. Recall a time when you were late for something very important. Why were you delayed, and how did you feel? How did other people respond to your lateness? With compassion? With anger?

As ours is a world of haste and anxiety, our responses are often (over)reactions to frustration and exhaustion. How might our "keeping awake" serve us in tending not only to ourselves but to those around us, particularly those against whom the door has been shut?

3. What do you know from your own life of being spiritually inattentive and then, in a crisis, making a desperate plea for help? Often, we rely on those who are more "spiritually mature" to help us in our times of need; how can you tell if someone is spiritually mature? Concerning this parable, do you find the inability (or unwillingness) to help the unprepared an act of selfishness on the part of the more mature? Or, are we to recognize the reality that everyone must do his or her own work of spiritual preparation? After all, faith and spiritual maturity are not commodities we can instantly acquire much less give away. When have you experienced this dynamic or this frustration?
4. Do you tend to your spiritual life regularly, or do you tend to let it slide until you are in a real pinch? What can we do to help us remain vigilant about our relationship with God, instead of allowing it to take a back seat to other concerns?

More specifically, what do you know about "dozing off," letting an important relationship lapse in your life? When the relationship reached a crisis point, did you have what you needed to restore it? Consider the consequences of putting off attention to our relationships with each other and with God.

How might we acquire a sense that we are storing up oil for those times when we will lapse, doze, or become spiritually inattentive? How might we rest assured that we do, finally, have what we need?

5. Consider this proposition. People who expect to find joy and wonder and beauty in their daily lives seem to find these things much more regularly than those who do not expect to find them. Those who prepare for joy, experience it; and, those who believe in a heavenly realm that can break in on us at any moment are much more likely to experience this realm than those who are not so expectant and hopeful.

What is it you are expecting of your daily life? What are some of the wondrous and beautiful and godly things you might have missed (or may be missing now?) had you not been prepared to witness or receive them?



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