St. Columba's Episcopal Church
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Matthew 25:1-13 – The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids
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As you know, Jesus often taught using parables, simple stories with the power to reveal deep truth if the hearer takes the time to consider the stories with attention. Jesus' parables are meant to do something in the minds, hearts, and lives of the people who hear them. Their job is to confront us, disturb us, provoke and shock us, and remind us of truths about God, life, and ourselves. The parables have many meanings. We hear different messages in them depending on what is happening in our lives and in the world around us. The parables are full of power, if we have ears to hear.

Let's consider The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. First, a bit of historical background. In wedding customs of 1st century Palestine, it was common for the bridegroom to be escorted by a company of bridesmaids to the home of the bride. They would then escort the couple to the house where the wedding and the wedding feast were to take place. That is the setting of Jesus' parable.

As you heard and read this familiar parable, what shocked you? I was shocked by the wise bridesmaids who refused to share their oil. But even more shocking was the bridegroom – the Messiah – who shut the door of the banquet hall to the foolish bridesmaids with the awful words, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." And let's not forget the shocking context of the parable itself, the words of Jesus that introduce the story: "The kingdom of heaven will be like this" and the warning he issues at the end of the story: "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

This parable is near the end of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is in Jerusalem and the time of his death is near. He has had many confrontations with religious leaders, often beginning "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" He has lamented over Jerusalem, "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" He teaches his disciples about the end of the age, the coming of the Son of Man at an unexpected hour, the final judgment of all people. This parable is one part of Jesus' urgent warning to his followers. Wake up! Now!

What about the wise bridesmaids who refused to share their oil with the foolish bridesmaids? The wise bridesmaids kept what they had so they would have enough to be ready for the bridegroom's arrival. Were they wrong not to share? Doesn't scripture teach us to share what we have with those who lack what we have? Doesn't Jesus teach and model self-giving behavior? Why does the bridegroom invite these bridesmaids who don't share into the banquet hall and shut the door on the others?

In order to understand Jesus' parables, we need to hear them with the ears of the original audience, as much as we can. That means learning about people who are different from us in many ways. Jesus' audiences were Jewish people, familiar with the

stories and teachings of the Hebrew Bible. They knew what we are unlikely to know: in the Hebrew Bible oil was sometimes a metaphor for righteousness or good deeds.

In the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids oil is not a valuable commodity that might be shared. Think instead of good deeds. We have either done them or we haven't. You can't give me your good deeds, and I can't give you mine. We either take the life of being prepared for the bridegroom to heart or we don't. It is our choice. If we are wise, we recognize the absolute importance of being prepared for the bridegroom. We will fill our lamps with oil, and we will be ready. If we are foolish, we will appear to be bridesmaids who are ready for the bridegroom, but because our lamps are empty of oil they will go out – darkness instead of light.

I think of these words in the Letter of James (2:14-17): "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Each bridesmaid decided how to behave in the time she had to prepare. When the bridegroom arrived, each bridesmaid then faced either an open door to the banquet hall or a door that was closed. I hope this parable makes you as uncomfortable as it makes me! This is the teaching of Jesus – It's time to wake up! Now!

We can apply this parable to ourselves as members of the church today. The wise people in the church are prepared to wait for Jesus as long as it takes. They are prepared to hold onto their faith in Christ and the coming reign of God no matter what happens in the world or in the church or in their lives. They keep on praying. They keep on serving God, worshipping God, loving God. They keep trying to love and serve their neighbors. They hold onto their hope for God's final victory over the forces of darkness and evil in spite of the terror of those forces. Because of their faith in Christ, they give and work to keep the church going. They turn back to God when they've turned away. They open their hearts to grow in love, by God's grace.

The fruits of a faithful Christian life can certainly be shared with others to some extent. Faithful people can give love and compassion and comfort to people without faith. But a person who has lived with the faithfulness I have just described cannot hand over to a person without faith the value gained from a life of faith. In this sense the wise bridesmaids could not give their oil to the foolish bridesmaids. The Christian life just doesn't work that way.

I hope and pray that we will be wise members of Christ's church, preparing day by day to meet our Lord, doing all we can to help one another "keep the faith." In Jesus' parable there was not <u>one</u> wise bridesmaid, but five. We are not alone. We are in the company of all God's faithful people, those here among us now and those who have already gone to God. The faith of each gives us all a little light, a light of hope, as we wait together for the coming of our Lord, as long as it takes. Amen.