

Sermon - November 8, 2020
“I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Matthew 25:1-13

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning, and good morning to all who are watching or will watch on the live stream. Let’s join together this morning and celebrate some of the events in the life of our church that occurred this past week. The Good News Club continues to seek to work with children via Zoom. We are seeking to engage with additional children, so keep praying that God will open the door for this electronic approach for sharing the Gospel in our community. Those attending the Afton Bible study of the Gospel of John this past week encountered Jesus as the Word, Light, and Flesh. At the Fairfields’ Bible study, we were challenged to trust in God even and especially when we are faced with overwhelming odds. We are to trust God even in the darkest times of life. The UMW is back meeting in person at Afton and beginning to plan for the upcoming holidays. The yard sale at Fairfields continues to be blessed with new items and continued sales. For those taking the Healing and Awakening courses, we discovered what it means to encounter relational love in Christ and to be transformed by that experience. And finally, all of us, I hope, have been blessed by a week of beautiful fall weather, the turning of the leaves and a witness through creation to our Creator.

Let’s look at this parable from a summary standpoint. First, let me give a little background that might be helpful. Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of heaven, and this is one of several parables in the Gospel of Matthew about the kingdom of heaven. This is again a parable where Jesus uses a wedding to make his points. Weddings would be familiar to those listening as they were a daily occurrence in Jerusalem. Those listening would know and understand the details Jesus speaks about for weddings. Unfortunately, for us today there has been no wedding manual from first century Palestine found and translated to help us understand the wedding references in this parable. We are not sure what function the ten virgins and their

lamps served in a wedding. Were they to escort the bride? A bride is not mentioned. Were they to escort the bridegroom? Why did they have lamps? Where did they wait for the bridegroom? We just don't know the answer to these and many other questions. Some aspects of the parable we do grasp as Jesus gives us information. Let me summarize the parable with a plain reading of the text. There are ten virgins (unmarried women) who are to be bridesmaids for a wedding. Jesus tells us five of them are wise and five are foolish. They all come carrying lamps. The lamp here is not the personal lamp pictured on the bulletin, but is a torch made of rags that must be re-soaked frequently for it to give light. Their purpose is not to light a small room but to provide light to walk a path at night. What makes the wise virgins wise are the flasks of oil they bring to the place where they wait for the bridegroom. What makes the foolish virgins foolish is that they do not come prepared with extra oil for the wedding party. Next, we know that the arrival of the bridegroom is delayed and all ten must wait. As they wait, they all fall asleep. Suddenly, at midnight they are awakened with a shout that the bridegroom is coming. They all wake up and trim or re-soak and relight their lamps so that they can have light to escort the bridegroom into the banquet. The wise are successful as they have come prepared with extra oil. The foolish are not prepared and ask the wise to share their oil. The wise decline to share their oil and the foolish are sent away to a source of oil. While the foolish are gone, the bridegroom arrives. Those prepared provide light for him and those traveling with him, and go with the bridegroom into the wedding feast, and the door to the feast is closed. At some point, the foolish virgins return, knock on the door, and ask the bridegroom to let them in, but they are rejected as they are not known to the bridegroom. They have missed their chance to enter into the feast with the bridegroom.

We are left asking ourselves, "Why does Jesus tell this parable? What are we supposed to learn about the kingdom of God from this parable?" Let's formulate some possible answers to these questions. One of the first ideas that comes to mind is that Jesus might be commenting on first century wedding practices. However, given that Jesus only uses the wedding as a familiar example and does not comment on it or its practice, it is safe to assume that Jesus is not commenting on first century wedding practices. We can set that possibility aside.

Next, we are left wondering if maybe the harsh response of the wise virgins to the foolish virgins and the wise virgins' refusal to share their oil might be the point of Jesus' telling of the parable. It just seems unchristian for these who have extra oil not to share it with those who have

none. Can't they just share their oil and all get along and go with the bridegroom when he comes? They don't really each need their own light, do they? This behavior seems on the surface to be inconsistent with what Jesus teaches elsewhere. The response of the five wise virgins does stand out as an odd response among those in the kingdom of God. Shouldn't they sacrifice their oil so that others can go before them? Aren't we supposed to be willing to love our neighbors as ourselves and treat them as we would like to be treated? I have to be honest that the response of the wise virgins has always bothered me whenever I read this text. But Jesus calls those prepared with extra oil wise and not unloving. Their actions allow them to accompany the bridegroom into the feast, to fulfil their purpose in the wedding ritual, and to become known to the bridegroom, and consequently welcomed at the wedding banquet. There is something about their management of their oil, something in their preparedness, that Jesus is affirming and not condemning. Jesus does not comment on their lack of willingness to sacrifice and there is no response from those listening to the parable, so this must be an aspect of the wedding ritual that is understood to be correct behavior. Those who brought extra oil are prepared and acting as they should. Those without oil, whose lamps are going out, need to go and get more oil for themselves. This is not the focus of Jesus' parable, even if it does read in a difficult manner for us and our current understanding of acceptable behavior for those who seek to follow Christ.

Perhaps Jesus is commenting in this parable on the bridegroom being late for the wedding? Yes, maybe his comments are about the bad behavior of the bridegroom who is late for his wedding and makes the bridesmaids wait wherever they are gathered, so late, in fact, that those waiting to go with him into the feast fall asleep. Now I personally can relate to the idea of being late for events. I will say that I was on time for my wedding, but only because my best man was insistent that we get there and get prepared well ahead of time. I can relate to this idea of being detained. Some writers speculate that the bridegroom is negotiating with the bride's family over some aspect of the bride price and that it might be part of the ritual to "detain" the bridegroom from the feast. We don't know and we should notice that Jesus does not comment on the lateness of the bridegroom other than to tell those listening that it happens. It seems to be an acceptable part of the story.

We seem to be running into a lot of dead ends as we seek to understand what Jesus is teaching with his sharing of this parable. What is left? Perhaps he is commenting on the preparedness of the wise virgins? He does call those who brought extra oil, those who came

prepared to wait until the arrival of the bridegroom, wise, and those who failed to make this preparation foolish. Maybe we are onto something here with this line of thought. Those who are prepared are welcomed into the wedding banquet. Those who are ready and light the way for the wedding party to travel through the dark are those who become known to the bridegroom and are welcomed into the feast. There are two words in the first sentence that we do not want to miss as we seek to understand this parable. If we notice them, they will drive our understanding of this parable. Can you guess what they are? They are in the very first sentence, the words “then” and “will,” future tense words. This is the only parable in Matthew that Jesus begins with the word “then.” These future tense words tell us that what Jesus is teaching through the parable is in the future and not in the present in-breaking kingdom of God. This parable speaks not to a characteristic of the in-breaking kingdom of God, but to a future time in the kingdom, a future event that is yet to come. Jesus is giving us insight into the end of time, the time when he will return and gather to him those who are prepared. It is a time after which the door will be closed forever for those not prepared. It is a time when the bridegroom will tell them he does not know them and they will be closed out of the kingdom of God. If we seek to understand this parable in the light of this being a future end-of-time parable that describes the return of Jesus in power to separate the living and the dead, we begin to understand more of the actions that are answers to our questions. With this approach we can see Jesus as the bridegroom who has gone away and is delayed before his final return. Perhaps he is delayed so that the full number can be included in the kingdom of God. We can understand that the ten virgins represent all those made in the image of God who are given a lamp to carry, a light that marks them as those who are called to be part of the kingdom of God. When we see the virgins all fall asleep as they wait for the bridegroom, we do not wonder if they lack diligence, but we recognize a fate we will all face, death, a time when all on the earth will fall asleep. When we hear the shout that the bridegroom is coming, we understand that the last trumpet has sounded and all are awakened either to accompany the bridegroom into the kingdom or to be shut out as those who are not known by the bridegroom. With our eyes to the future fullness of the kingdom of God, we can understand that only those who are prepared, who have loved God and loved their neighbors as themselves, who have accepted the invitation of the bridegroom to come into the kingdom of heaven, and have prepared themselves with the works and the characteristics of one found in the kingdom of God are welcomed. We can understand that the oil represents the fruit of those in the kingdom and

cannot be shared, that each of us must come before the throne as we are and will be judged by a righteous judge in light of what we have done in response to the gift of salvation we have received. Jesus will provide other parables that will highlight the characteristics of those who are prepared for the kingdom, those parables will discuss responsibility, readiness (the subject of this parable), productivity, and accountability. For those who follow in the Wesleyan tradition, we call the idea of preparation “sanctification,” our response which follows our justification by and through Christ. It is a time in our lives where we seek to grow into the image of Christ, a time when we seek to be remade into those who are found in the kingdom of God. It is a time of going on to perfection, a time of becoming complete in Christ. We will talk more about how to be found as those who are prepared for eternity at other times.

The idea of this parable is for us to become those who are prepared. If you have not accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior, do so today. That is the first step in becoming prepared to become wise. If you have, then let’s get to work in the kingdom of God. That is the next step in getting prepared. Let’s come together to learn who Jesus is, what a follower of Christ looks like, and then help each other to grow into that image. Let’s be those who are encouraging each other to be at work in the kingdom of God while we expectantly await the return of Jesus. Let us be those who are seeking with all of our hearts the Lord and are seeking to be the church, the body of Christ right here right now. Let us pray that we may find relationships where we can love each other and help each other become those who are going on to perfection, those who are being filled with the perfect love of Christ, those whose flask is filled with oil that will allow our light to burn brightly in the kingdom of God and be a light of love to others.

If you would like to get started on becoming prepared, then let me suggest we consider this as a starting point, seeking to become three-hour-a-week people, and then grow our preparations from there. Spend an hour a week worshipping God, spend an hour a week learning and studying about Jesus and God, and then spend an hour a week loving others, developing relationships where the love of Christ can flow from us to others and from others to us. Our goal is to be those who are fully sanctified, those who are growing daily into the image of Christ. Our goal is to have a light that burns brightly when we are awakened by the sound of the last trumpet.

There is a second coming at an unexpected time, noted in the parable by the awakening shout at midnight, when Christ comes in power to welcome those who are prepared, those who are light to the lost, those who are known to Christ by their love; and then the door is closed. The

wise will be ready to wake up, trim their lamps, use the oil they have prepared, and let the light of Christ shine through them. The foolish will think they are prepared, will wake up, and their lights will go out. They will search for oil to light their lamps, will not find any, and will miss their chance to go into the wedding feast with the bridegroom. Which will we be? Decide and act accordingly.

Pray with me: Jesus, come and be Lord in my life. Guide me into preparations for all of eternity. Holy Spirit, stir our hearts that we might become aware of where you are leading us to join with Jesus in his mission here to all people. Open our eyes to see our need for preparation before the arrival of the bridegroom. Holy Spirit, guide us into loving relationships where we can grow into those prepared for the coming of the bridegroom and the wedding banquet of heaven. Amen.