

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. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹But 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.' ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' ¹²But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Matthew 25:1-13, 2014

It is easy to understand the allegory here. The Bridegroom is Jesus and you are the bridesmaids. If you aren't ready when He comes you don't get into heaven.

But this parable creates an awful tension between what may appear to be the work the bridesmaids have to do to get into the banquet, the preparation, and the waiting for the bridegroom,
and between the required preparation and the invitation of the bridegroom, which at least should in and of itself grant them entrance.

What is it?

Do the bridesmaids have to earn their way into the banquet,
or run the risk of not being prepared and being left outside,
or is the invitation enough?

Judging by the parable you might believe that the invitation is not enough because 5 of the bridesmaids were left outside the banquet hall and could not get in after the door was shut.

But, why have they really been left out?

One would think it is because they didn't bring enough oil for their lamps and their lamps ran out while they were waiting for the bridegroom.

Is that the case, really?

It may be helpful to understand the wedding culture of Jesus' day to understand this parable.

In Jesus time, the wedding banquet was a community affair and it lasted sometimes a week. All the preparations were made ahead of time and the bridesmaids would go keep the bride company until the bridegroom came. But no one would know when the bridegroom would arrive and one of the fun things for the bridegroom to do was to catch the bridal party napping as they waited. So the bridegroom would come in the middle of the night sometimes, keeping with tradition, sending a man ahead of him to announce his coming.

The bridal party would have to be ready to go out into the street, with lamps lit, to meet him whenever he came.

This tradition sets up the tension between the business of proper preparation and the invitation. The lack of preparation by the 5 bridesmaids sets up the tension between the preparation and the power or validity of the invitation.

So, I ask again, why have they really been left out?

What you notice in the parable is that the focus of the bridesmaids is turned to the oil and away from the bridegroom when they hear the announcement,
“He is coming.”

The bridesmaids wake up and discover that their lamps burned out while they were sleeping and they need to refill them with oil.

But, only 5 of the bridesmaids have extra oil.

The other five try to get the bridesmaids with extra to give them some and they say no, and send them out into the darkness to buy some.

The result of this is that the five with extra get in the banquet and the others don't,
not because they were late; not because they didn't have any oil, not because they had fallen asleep,
but because they had taken their eye off the bridegroom who invited them;

They knew what it took to get in and the bridesmaids had become more focused on other things besides the bridegroom.

And I don't mean just the bridesmaids who had no oil left,

I mean all the bridesmaids had taken their eye off the invitation.

I include the ones who have oil and sent the others away to get more oil from the dealers. The ones who had oil for their lamps were no more entitled to the banquet than the ones who had run out, they all got the same invitation.

The five with oil only thought they were more deserving because they had brought enough oil while the other ones had not.

They thought they had done enough and the other 5 had not,

they thought they had prepared enough to deserve admittance into the banquet and so sent the others away.

Does this make any sense?

- Did the five without oil do the right thing by going to the dealers for more oil?
- Did the five with oil do the right thing by sending the others out into the darkness without oil in their lamps?

Think about it. If the bridesmaids who had run out of oil had to go out into the dark without lamps to get oil, why couldn't they go out into the dark without lamps to meet the bridegroom?

Because they had taken their eye off the bridegroom and had focused on the oil, and on what **they** had to do to get into the banquet!

They focused on themselves, and the oil dealers to get them into the banquet, not the bridegroom.

They are too late. The door is shut.

Well, what about the bridesmaids who had enough oil? They did all the right things to get themselves into the banquet didn't they: plenty of oil, at the banquet hall on time. They got in. But I go back to the question,

“Did they do the right thing?”

These bridesmaids have sent their sisters out into the darkness without lamps, without oil, and finally left them without any hope of getting into the banquet.

Is that what the bridegroom wanted?

Couldn't they have said you are invited because the bridegroom wants you there and the oil doesn't really matter. Come and take hold of my lamp, there is room for your hand on the handle too.

It isn't the oil that is the problem here, but the heart, the lack of willingness to share.

We may want to say, well it must have been okay, they got into the banquet didn't they?

But if we read on in this 25th chapter of Matthew we hear Jesus words from our gospel lesson for 2 weeks from now:

'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

What you have done to the bridesmaids with no oil you have done to me the bridegroom.

What have they done?

It is interesting that if we go back to the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 through 7 of Matthew, we read Jesus' words in the beginning right after the Beatitudes,

“Let your light so shine before others so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

At the end of the same sermon Jesus says, “ Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

Next week we will hear these words at the end of the parable of the Talents, “Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.”

In today’s parable we hear at the beginning: “Ten bridesmaids took their lamps, their lights, and went to meet the bridegroom.

And at the end we hear 5 of them say:

Lord, Lord, open to us! But He replied, “Truly, I tell you I don’t know you.”

These sayings that set conditions on our entering into heaven are so hard to reconcile with the loving, gracious God we always think about.

What kind of God do we believe in?

As you know, we must take all the scriptures together to understand them and God as fully as possible.

You remember the command to love God and love neighbor. Those are pretty clear and understandable.

All the others are encompassed in these two.

Our Father in heaven has given us things to do to prepare this world for the return of His Son; lamps to keep lit.

We here at All Saints have a little piece of that work to do. God has given us a vision for that work and it

is encapsulated in the words of our proposed vision statement:

“Capture the vision...Share the mission to grow in faith, lead others to faith, change the lives of people in our community and impact the world.”

Is your entry into heaven going to depend on our success in this? No, that promise is sealed in your baptism, but what about the others in the world who can't claim that promise?

We are called to oil their lamps, to light their lamps, to let their light shine, to make sure they are given entry into the banquet because our lamps are well oiled, because our light shines in this world, because we will be at the banquet.

In the end those words, “Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.” have real meaning.