

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstons Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
12 November 2023

Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus' longest day in Matthew started with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the Temple. The next day, Jesus starts the day with cursing a fig tree as an example of the faith his followers should have. With sufficient faith, they too would be able to do such feats. He knew they would need the type of faith that could move mountains because they were about to face great persecution, and he himself would be arrested, tortured, and killed.

Then, as soon as he enters the Temple that Tuesday morning, the priests and elders challenge his authority. Jesus tells them three parables of the kingdom as a response: The two sons who were ordered to work in the vineyard, the parable of the wicked tenants, and the parable of the wedding banquet. The next challenge comes from a combined group of Pharisee disciples and Herodians who ask him a question about paying taxes to Ceasar. Then the Sadducees test him on the issue of resurrection, and a Pharisee lawyer tests him about the law of Moses, asking him about the greatest commandment. We are still on that important Tuesday and the scene is centered on the Temple, but the narrative changes from a contest of orthodoxy: the professionals ask the questions and Jesus defends himself, to a long sermon to the crowds and disciples in which Jesus denounces the hypocrisy of Pharisees and Scribes and laments over Jerusalem.

Then the narrative changes as Jesus leaves the Temple. As he is walking out, he prophesizes about the destruction of the temple, giving his disciples the signs they should watch for before the end of the age arrives: There will be violence and persecution; there will be a sacrilege of desolation in the temple and many false messiahs will come saying, "I am he," but they will be deceivers and false guides. After all of these dark days, however, "the Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

Obviously, such an announcement about the end of days brought up many questions from his disciples, "When will this be? How will we prepare for such a day so that we don't miss it or find ourselves on the wrong side?" Jesus responds to these questions by telling them a few parables emphasizing the need for

watchfulness: It will be like in the days of Noah when people were going about doing what they always did, unaware that their lives were about to be cut short by a flood. It will be like a thief who breaks into a house in the middle of the night because, catching the family unaware. “If the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.”

After this, Matthew gives us four unique parables about what the kingdom of heaven is like: Is like a dutiful slave that is found busy at work when the Master arrives and is then vested with great power. But the wicked slave who “beats his fellow-slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards” will see the Master arrive when he least expects and will pay the terrible consequences of his neglect. The Master will “put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Then Jesus introduces the second parable of the kingdom of heaven, the passage we have today. We are still on that crucial Tuesday of Holy Week and his arrest and crucifixion are near. We need to read this parable with an eye on the passion of the Messiah.

Jesus says, “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.” You know the rest of the story. Five of the bridesmaids lack the sufficient supplies to wait for the groom and, when he finally arrives, they miss the chance to join the party. This is a parable that makes me uncomfortable. Greg Carey, a professor of theology at a seminary in PA puts it this way, “Is that how it works, that one apparently arbitrary decision marks the line between inclusion and exclusion from the ultimate party? This parable just doesn’t feel like the gospel.” ([See full commentary here.](#)) I agree with Carey, where is the Gospel if a foolish decision can lead us into eternal damnation? After all, these five foolish maids were from the same group, waited as the other waited, and other than the fact that they don’t have sufficient oil, seem to be just as pious as the others.

So, in order to understand this parable we need to remember Matthew’s community. They are under persecution around the year 80, some of them who expected Jesus’ return within their generation are growing weary and are slacking in their faith and in their fervor. Some have gotten so tired of waiting that they have left the movement and have gone back to their former faiths and lives. Matthew’s warning here is that the return of Jesus will be sudden, unexpected, when we may be so busy with our own lives that we fail to even notice his arrival.

This passage about lamps needs to be compared with another passage about lamps also original to Matthew. Jesus said during his beatitudes sermon, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (5:16). Many in Matthew’s community had given up hope of Christ’s return and were not giving God glory through the quality of their lives. Although the action is presented here as a solitary event (they had to go buy oil and missed the Master), Matthew implies a lifestyle. Some are leading lives that are void of any oil, any living witness of the joy of the Gospel within them and their community, any signs of a cross-centered life. They got “no juice” as some say today. They are leading lives centered on an ethic of self-involvement and self-preoccupation, not lives of engagement and commitment to God and others.

Yes, some of them still come to church like everyone else. They attend services like anyone else. They are fed by liturgy and sacrament like anyone else. Together they wait for the same Lord. But, when it really matters, their lives do not show an ethic of love of God and others which is characteristic of the disciples of Jesus. Their lights do not shine before others and for this reason others are not giving glory to God in heaven. This is the real purpose of a love-driven, love-inspired, love-fueled lifestyle: not that we may be glorified, but that God in heaven may be glorified. Love is the real center of this parable. If these maids had love for their Master and fellow maids, they would have been ready. Their lives would be shining brightly to lead others to the banquet feast. Lamps in that context were absolutely necessary. There is no electricity, the roads are dangerous, and without light many would lose their way. It is the job of the Christians to light a path for others to find the banquet of our loving Lord. To show the world where they can find Jesus is our ultimate commission and vocation.

To live fully into God’s call for our lives is to live joyfully into an ethic of service and love, not for our sake, but that others may worship and give praise to our God. We are to be the beacons on the hill, to use a well-known metaphor. This parable is not about the dangers of sleep. It is rather about the dangers of complacency, apathy, egoism, faithlessness, and the many self-directed behaviors of many Christians who attend the same services others attend, but who are unchanged and unmoved by those services. If the Gospel of Jesus does not change us and make us more loving Christians, then we have no oil in our lamps and we are not shining with the light that brings others to God. May God continue to bless you. Amend!