Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Tx
8 November 2026

Matthew 25:1-13

Do you remember a show called, "Naked and Afraid?" It was quite popular a few years ago and you can still see reruns today. The premise is very simple. A couple is dropped in a remote wilderness location absolutely naked and without any supplies at all. They then have to make their way out, often confronting animals, hunger, thirst and a number of other dangers. And, of course, you know these are real dangers because the background music is fit for a horror movie score. You also see them whispering softly into the camera about how scared they are. Of course, all of this is meant to elicit our sympathy and our loyalty. We have no choice but to watch the whole show until they make it out, always alive and well.

What makes me laugh about these shows is how "unreal" this supposed "reality" show is. Early this year I watched as my wife prepared and packed for her Camino to the Shrine of Santiago de Compostela. Whereas all I would pack is a bottle of water and a flashlight, she had a backpack filled with everything she would ever need should the Zombie Apocalypse arrive in Spain while she was out in the woods. From band aids to toilet tissue, antibiotic ointment to enough batteries to light up a small town, and from trail mix and sardines to crackers and jellies. In fact, had I been given permission to inspect the backpack fully, I would have found a vial with the antidote for snake bites and the cure for Ebola.

This is what real hikers and trekkers do. They don't go into the wilderness "naked and afraid." Rather, they prepare for the elements and for any emergency they might come across in the wilderness. In today's Gospel Matthew gives us a similar situation. Before we talk about the parable, let us review where we are in Matthew because we are almost at the end of the book. A while back I told you that Matthew takes the Gospel of Mark and introduces five original speeches or sermons into it to make Mark more complete. In each of the sermons, Matthew gives us unique material, which some of the other Gospel writers don't give us.

The parable of the foolish and wise virgins or bridesmaids belongs to Matthew's last sermon. What this means, is that this parable is unique to Matthew. This fifth sermon began at 24:45. The verse before reads as follows, "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (24:44). Then, almost as a way of illustrating what this "Be prepared" or "Be awake" means, Matthew gives us his last speech. This speech has four different parables, all of which share the same structure:

a. They all have a master, bridegroom or king who is coming to his land, his wedding party, or his kingdom. In each case, there are workers, maids or servants whose job it is to prepare for his coming.
b. In each case the Master, bridegroom or ruler is delayed.
c. In each case he arrives at an unexpected hour to find some of the slaves, servants, maids prepared for his coming and some totally unprepared.
d. In each case, the prepared servants are rewarded and the unprepared servants are punished, often by being banished from the kingdom to a place of punishment.

In the first parable of this unit (Matthew 24:45-51) a master goes away and leaves a slave in charge of his other slaves and possessions. Upon his return, if the wise slave is found hard at work, he will be put in charge of all his possessions. But if he is found idle, he will be expelled to a place where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth. The second parable is the wise and unwise bridesmaids which we have as a passage for today (Matthew 25:1-13.) The third parable is the story of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30.) A master who is going away gives three of his servants different talents, according to their abilities. When he expects a return on his investment equal or greater than the amount given to invest. The wise servants provide this return on investment, while the last produces no return. That one is punished and expelled to outer darkness. The last parable is the separation of the sheep from the goats. The sheep took care of the least of those in the kingdom and receive their reward. The goats, on the other hand, failed to care for them and must face punishment, which again is seen as exile from the Master.

In the parable today we see ten bridesmaids or virgins. Their job is to wait for the bridegroom to come to his party, to light the way from the path to the home where the party is to take place, and then to join him in the celebration. At first all 10 wait together in great expectation, but as the Groom takes longer and longer to arrive, they all fall asleep. At some point, they see the groom coming at a distance and they wake up to get ready for him. At this point, the wise maids refill their lamps with olive oil and take their positions to wait for him.

The unwise maids realize their lack of preparation and beg the other maids for oil, which they refuse to do. It would be irresponsible for them to risk running out of oil. This would indicate a lack of foresight that would dishonor the groom. He might think they didn't care enough to prepare for a long wait. The unprepared maidens underestimated the difficulty of the task and took the groom for granted. They either thought he was coming very quickly and their oil was sufficient, or they gave up all hope he was ever going to show up and failed to prepare for a long

wait. In either case, they have to go out to purchase oil, which produces catastrophic results: the doors are shut and they are sent away.

It is very interesting that until the point where they see the Groom at a distance, all 10 bridesmaids behave in exactly the same way. There is no way to tell them apart. It is at the time of arrival that a substantial difference is noticed. Some of them are prepared and some are not. The only distinction is the level of preparation. Some find this very unfair. Can a small amount of oil make this much difference? Is this Groom utterly unfair? Where is the Gospel here?

These are good questions, but this is a metaphorical story where each element of the story can have a number of meanings and can point in a number of directions. This can't be taken literally. Christ is not calling us to store millions of gallons of oil to prepare ourselves for his coming. The "oil" here stands for something else. For many the oil stands for good works, for some it is faith, for some others it is the Holy Spirit, etc. I believe the last line in the parable gives us the best explanation for what the oil signifies. The Groom tells the maids who were not allowed in, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you."

The wise maids were known by the Groom, but the unwise maids were not known. I believe oil here means a relationship with the Groom. Those who are known are allowed in, but those who are not known are thrown out. The key of this parable is a relationship that develops over time and grows even in spite of hardship, delays, and the temptation to give up and believe he is not coming. The unwise maids have an "Out of sight, out of mind" approach to the Groom, whereas the wise maids build a supply of oil, slowly, little by little, to the point that when the Groom arrives he knows them intimately and welcomes them in.

The parable does not tell us how the wise maids came to have sufficient oil. This is left to us to interpret. I believe it happens over time, over the course of a lifetime. The relationship is a sum of all our small acts of prayer, our acts of compassion, our participation in liturgy, our times of meditation as we get to know our Messiah in Scripture, the millions of small acts of kindness nobody notices, our internal dialogue with Jesus, the steadfastness of our faith, our fulfillment of commitments we have made, the moments of heartache we share with Jesus, our willingness to listen to others, etc. These are not just lists of good works. These are the many ways we share our life with Jesus every day to allow him to know us for whom we are and not just for what we do. The question for us is simple: When our Groom comes, will he know us by name? Will he find us prepared and ready? Or will he find us naked and afraid?

May he continue to bless us. Amen!