

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church
12 November 2017
Pentecost XXIII Proper 27A (Matthew 25:1-13)

Most of us have been to a wedding.

Many of us have been to a wedding where at least *some* of the participants weren't quite ready for the celebration.

Been there, done that.

A bride who was forty minutes late to her wedding because her uncle was taking the bridesmaids' photos and didn't want to be rushed.

A groom who was having just a *swell* time with his groomsmen – such a swell time that he didn't look at the clock. Twenty minutes late.

Bridesmaids who took so long applying their makeup, freshening their hairdo's, fluffing up their gowns that they *rushed* into the procession line looking more frazzled than they had before.

Groomsmen who wanted to hang out in the parking lot and then arrived at the procession kinda... sweaty.

None of these things have happened here at St. John's, of course, but they do happen, and they've happened to me. And then at one rehearsal the bride asked, "Where's the music!?" I replied, "You said you didn't want music." "Oh. Right."

And the groom's mother who insisted on a unity candle and brought one to the church just before the ceremony was to start. I think she got it at the Dollar Store, because once it was lit, well, the wick didn't go straight down through the candle, it sort of angled off to the side and all of a sudden we had four-foot flames in front of the altar. I wasn't really looking for a Pentecost experience, but there it was...

Many of us are procrastinators, at least for certain tasks. Personally, I don't like dealing with insurance companies, auto repair businesses, and I sometimes put off cancelling or setting up meetings – for which I hereby apologize. I don't like cleaning my study, and it shows.

But I'm usually on time, sometimes early. We learned during our first year here that in Michigan people show up *on time*. That is, in New York or San Francisco, if you invite people for, say, an open house between six and nine guests will drift in and out starting around seven. I remember once here, though, where we were having a social gathering starting at six. At five fifty-five there was no one in sight. At six *on the dot* there were fifteen people on the front porch! *And I wasn't ready!*

Is it a Michigan thing?

Jesus is admonishing us to be ready. Neither the wise nor the foolish bridesmaids are really people I want to hang around with – the so-called wise bridesmaids, are, to me, selfish. The so-called foolish bridesmaids are unprepared. All of them seem to think that the oil, not the

celebration, is the most important thing to consider – and I don't think that's what Jesus meant. I truly think that Jesus wants us *all* at the banquet; I suspect it is *Matthew* who is suggesting that some will enter and some will not.

So if you're a bit confused or perturbed by this parable, fear not: You're not alone. I was at a meeting of Deanery clergy with our Bishop on Tuesday, and several said, "I'm going to preach on Thessalonians. Or the Psalm. Or maybe the reading from Joshua."

Here are some other confusions...

Who is the bridegroom? Some preachers and Bible interpreters will say it is Jesus: It is Jesus we (and the bridesmaids) are waiting for. But what about the possibility that the bridegroom is *not* Jesus, but the groom who simply doesn't care that people are waiting for him, that he's upsetting the norms of social behavior, that he's really an ignorant snob who's only going to admit the so-called *wise* bridesmaids to his party?

Jesus isn't that kind of guy. Jesus doesn't just *arrive*, Jesus is *here*. All the time. For ever and beyond.

And why did the so-called foolish bridesmaids leave? Apparently there was enough light from five oil lamps – were they so self-conscious that they were embarrassed their lights had gone out? Did they want to impress the groom with *their* oil lamps?

The sad thing is that when they left to buy more oil they missed the party. When we turn from the community to take care of ourselves – instead of one another – we *miss* the community. And I think that when we're not quite ready Jesus puts his foot in the door so we will *not* miss the banquet.

And as I said, I really don't like those wise bridesmaids. Their behavior is abhorrent – it is ungenerous and snipey: "Go down the road and get your own oil!" That's not the sort of behavior Jesus teaches us over and over again – "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." It seems to me that the so-called wise bridesmaids are exhibiting the sort of self-absorption that Jesus would admonish us against. It has nothing to do with loving your neighbor.

I think this parable displays more of Matthew's understanding of the Gospel of Christ and his immanent return than Jesus' gracious message of Godly love.

Be that as it may – and remember, not only does a Gospel writer infuse the story of Jesus with his own interpretation, but a preacher adds a layer of interpretation as well! – Be that as it may, let's think for a moment how we can tease some Good News out of this story.

I think the story may be about spiritual preparedness. About how we are to be vigilant in our spiritual lives not just today or this week, but every day, every week. We are to seek the oil that will keep our lamps lit, the oil that will fuel the fire of justice in our heart, the oil that will burn steadily and surely and not run out. Oddly, that oil, I believe, is the water of life. Our Lord Jesus Christ.

For it is the love of Jesus that enkindles our passion for peace, reconciliation, fairness, justice, and love. It is the love of Jesus that sees us through the dark nights of our souls, when all seems hopeless – or nearly so.

And we are told to be awake. To be awake for the appearance of the Christ within each and every person we encounter. To be awake to the abundant generosity of God – for the gifts we take for granted, the food we eat, the work we do, the ministries we share, the community that surrounds us. To be awake to opportunity – opportunity to be generous, opportunity to be merciful, opportunity to be just.

And there are opportunities everywhere. Opportunities to serve the poor – at the rotating homeless shelter, with the Goodrow Fund, volunteering at the Soup Kitchen, building bunk beds in the Dakotas... Opportunities to act on behalf of justice through our political system by voting, speaking with our legislators, writing to the White House. Crying out that our immigration system is broken, that we still carry the burden of the sin that is racism, that women and girls are under-protected. We have opportunities to be awake, to carry the light of Christ in a broken world.

And that is what we must do.

Stay awake!

Amen.