

Matthew 25:1-13 (NRSV)

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

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

As I walked with the Gospel lesson for today, a song kept going through my mind. It's an old spiritual, "Keep Your Lamps (Trimmed and Burning)." Let me try to play a clip from it.

The words are:

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning (3x),
The time is drawing nigh.

Children, don't get weary,
'Til your work is done.

Christian journey soon be over
The time is drawing nigh.

Some people think that the song is about the Underground Railroad, sung as slaves waited for their dangerous transportation north to freedom. If that's true, the words are certainly appropriate – the time is coming, don't be weary 'til your work is done, the journey soon will be over – but the words are also appropriate to our own faith journeys, full of work but over too soon. Either way, this reading of the Gospel lesson keeps us focused not on the end of time, but on the Christian journey of life.

Let me give a little context for understanding the parable. In the ancient Near East, it was the custom to have ten young unmarried women escort the bride from her house to the bridegroom's house in a torchlight parade. So, imagine the 10 young ladies to be, say, 13 or 14 years old, about as old as our confirmands. They are carrying torches which would probably be vessels or containers full of oily rags that are fastened to the tops of poles. But 5 of the girls, the foolish virgins, didn't bring any oil. The other five brought enough olive oil to wet the rags so that the torches would burn.

The bridegroom is delayed and the young ladies probably have been talking and gossiping and giggling and got tired and fell asleep. All of a sudden the bridegroom is ready for the bride and the procession to start. So the bridesmaids trim their torches and try to light them, but the foolish bridesmaids don't have any oil so their torches start to sputter and go out.

Now, let me remind you that parables are not intended to be guides to your behavior. Should you share with your friends when you have oil or food or money or whatever and they do not? Of course you should and Jesus makes that point quite clear in many other parables. It's not the purpose of this parable to tell us how to behave in times of scarcity. Nor do I think that the bridesmaids are

to be blamed for falling asleep – after all, both the foolish and the wise bridesmaids fall asleep and you have to sleep sometime.

No, it seems to me that the reason that the foolish bridesmaids are foolish is that they didn't take seriously that they were going to be seeing the bridegroom. If they'd thought about it at all, they'd have known that they'd need oil to keep their torches lit. In a sense they lacked faith. Oh, they believed the right thing – they knew they were going to a wedding feast. They just didn't *rely* on that knowledge, they didn't *act as if* they were going to the feast.

I think this tells us something important about living faithfully. Faith is not intellectual agreement – faith is active reliance. Faith is not reciting the Lord's Prayer. Faith is *living as if* God's will is to be done on earth as it is in heaven, because it is. Faith is not reciting the Apostles' Creed. Faith is *living as if* he will come again to judge the living and the dead, because he will. You can believe all the right things and still have no faith – the foolish bridesmaids believed they were going to the wedding feast but they didn't rely on that knowledge, they didn't *act as if* they were going to the feast and that was foolish, because when the time came, they missed all the fun.

So, keeping your lamps filled is not an optional activity. It is a necessity if you want to be part of the celebration. How do we keep our lamps filled? Well, we fill our lamps in order to be ready when the bridegroom comes, so one way to be ready for the bridegroom, it seems to me, is to cultivate a relationship with him, through prayer, through worship and through spiritual disciplines. In prayer, in worship we rely on Jesus, the bridegroom of the church.

I suppose, too, that the foolish bridesmaids would have been better off if they'd had better relationships with the wise bridesmaids – the wise bridesmaids might have offered them a little good advice about how lamps stay lit, and in a pinch might have

offered to share a little oil, too. Of course, the foolish bridesmaids might have done a little research on how lamps work and what they need. This would probably have pointed out the error of trying to operate an oil lamp without oil.

Let's see, have a relationship with the bridegroom – love God. Have a relationship with your fellow bridesmaids – love others. Learn about how lamps work – teach and learn. What am I missing? Well, we are to be the light of the world, right? We need to be in the world if our light is to have any purpose at all. The light of the world won't work without oil, but the paradox is that we fill our lamps by serving the world.

It isn't selfish to fill your lamps and keep them full. To be the light of the world, to live ready for the return of the Bridegroom means to keep our lamps trimmed and burning. And we do this by being good and wise disciples.

And when will the Bridegroom return? The Bridegroom returns all the time. He is in the faces of my confirmation class who have been gathered together to teach me how to be a pastor and I really appreciate it. He is in the face of a new friend I met this week, a psychologist who taught me about eating disorders. He returns to me and to you in the face of everyone who has something he or she needs or he or she can offer, a matter of faithful reliance on the Bridegroom who promises to be with us, even to the end of the age.

We need to keep our lamps filled, trimmed and burning so that we can meet Jesus when he comes to us. This means that we need to keep them filled, trimmed and burning all of the time. Because he comes to us all of the time.

What is the oil you need? I don't presume to guess. For some people, it's time to be alone. For others, it's time to be together with other people. For some people, it's the time to read

and think, for others, it's the time to do God's work. Some people have too much time on their hands, others don't have enough. For me it's a variety of things. It's faith, an active living faith that gets enough exercise to be strong. It's the Word of God, good things to read and people to learn from. It's the sacraments, the love of family and friends, a Christian community to laugh with and to cry with and a healthy dose of the Holy Spirit.

So, is this Gospel reading not about being ready for Christ's return? Well, if Christ doesn't come again in my lifetime, I confess I will be a little disappointed. As I get older I'm accommodating myself to the idea, but as I say, I may be disappointed. In the meantime, I want to be ready for the little revelations, the little shocks of seeing the face of Christ every day in the people I meet and come to know and learn to love. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning.

Amen.