

Pentecost 22, Proper 27A
Matthew 25:1-13

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Today we have a strange Gospel reading. At this time of year, as we come to the last Sundays of what the church calls “ordinary time,” the Gospel lessons take on a different tone. The lessons in these final Sundays of the liturgical year begin to anticipate Jesus’ triumphal return in the Second coming and the Judgment Day, even as we turn our minds toward the beginning of Advent and the arrival of Christmas – the celebration of the first coming of Jesus as a baby in a manger. This parable of the “Ten Bridesmaids” is found only in St. Matthew’s Gospel, remembered in his early Christian community as a way by which Jesus explained what the Kingdom of Heaven will be like. It is a strange story. We are not sure why the bridesmaids would be waiting for the bridegroom to appear, or where the bride is, or the rest of the wedding party for that matter. I think the main point is that these ten women are waiting for someone very important to arrive. They are to have lamps to welcome the VIP in the night, as a signal that he is welcome and that they will escort him into the wedding. As the cry goes up that the bridegroom is nearing, five of the women realize they are unprepared, that they do not have enough oil. The other five, the wise bridesmaids, brought flasks with just enough extra oil to keep their personal lamps lit to welcome the bridegroom and to escort him to the wedding feast. They do not have enough to share with the foolish five. The unprepared five must go out and search for more oil themselves. There are clues in his gospel that St. Matthew’s community was struggling with what it meant that the apostles were dying and what it meant that the next generation needed to continue sharing the story of Jesus. Jesus had promised to return but had not returned as quickly as his followers had thought he would. The Kingdom had been declared but had not come into being just yet. They began to feel the weight of the “already but not yet” as the community began to switch emphasis from “He is coming again” to “we will continue to witness to Christ while we wait.” The question the parable poses to St. Matthew’s community and now to us is: Are you going to be one of the foolish bridesmaids caught short when the groom arrives, or are you going to prepare like one of the wise ones and be ready to welcome him properly? There doesn’t seem to be much grace for the five foolish bridesmaids who end up locked out, so we are clearly meant to count ourselves among the wise bridesmaids. But what does that look like? The parable points us toward an understanding of what it means to wait for Christ to return: are we simply waiting? Or are we looking *forward* to his triumphant return?

If you ever get the chance to travel to Tanzania and to go out to the village to visit with a parish, you will be in for a real treat. Tanzania is one of the countries in our world noted for its culture of hospitality. Guests, especially ones from far away, are received in ways that never fail to astound a visitor from the USA. We Americans are an open and generous people, and we know how to welcome guests to our homes – but upon your arrival at a village in Tanzania, you will be astounded. Ask anyone who has done it – I am sure Mother Elizabeth has a few stories like the one I am about to tell you. In 2009 I went with a group of seminarians from VTS to the Dioceses of Central Tanganyika for an immersion trip. One of the students, Josiah, signed up to have a three-week immersion in a parish in a rural village. The priest at this remote parish had been in communication with VTS and our local contact for weeks to prepare. It was about an hour and a half drive from the city of Dodoma down a highway and then along dusty, bumpy, dirt roads to reach the village. The truck we were in put up a huge rooster tail of dust behind us. The village would have seen us coming for miles. As we approached the village proper, we slowed and rolled down the windows. We could hear drums beating and singing. I had been through this a few times before during my time as a missionary, so I laughed with delight of knowing what was happening. I looked over at Josiah and his eyes were as big as saucers. People surrounded the car and waved and sang and children ran alongside us – a throng to escort us down Main Street to the church. Once we parked, we climbed out of the car and approached the front of the church. A group of older women, the bibis, the grandmother choir, formed up a semi-circle around Josiah and began to drum and sing. The priest came running up and began to interpret for Josiah what they were singing in the local language. They had written a special song for him of welcome. Phrases like “Welcome to you, Josiah from America! We have been waiting for you and preparing a feast! We are so happy you are here!” and on and on. As they sang they started a dance that brought them a few steps closer, then one back - like a wave approaching Josiah. He kept laughing and bowing and thanking them –but they kept singing and dancing until they surrounded him. Then they clapped and cheered and ululated...Then the babu choir, the grandfathers started up their welcome. They had bells on their legs and did their particular dance to a call and response song. Another group had started the cooking fires and were preparing the parish feast. The priest told us the crowds

had gathered about four hours before we arrived, working on the song and getting ready. The whole crowd was still going on like that as we drove away an hour later, leaving Josiah to begin his three weeks with them. In that part of Africa, you never really know when a guest will arrive because travel is so precarious. So the whole day becomes about the arrival and the waiting becomes more than just waiting. *The looking forward to the guest* becomes part of the celebration. That is what it means when you hear a culture described as a “hospitality culture.” The guest, the one they are expecting, is anticipated as a blessing upon the whole community and welcomed with great celebration. I think you can now see the difference between the welcome prepared for the bridegroom in the parable by the wise bridesmaids and that prepared for by the foolish ones. Who is anticipating and preparing and thinking the arrival through? Who is simply waiting, simply going through the motions? Waiting for the bridegroom for five of the bridesmaids is more than just, “I’ve got my lamp.” Five are thinking ahead in anticipation: “what else might be needed to ensure his arrival is well met?” Where are you in this parable? Where are we as a community on the spectrum of this paradigm?

St. Matthew wanted his gospel to encourage his community to not only wait for Christ to return, but to wait well – with anticipation. While each of the five wise bridesmaids had thought ahead and filled a spare flask with just enough for keeping their lamps lit the duration of the night, I think that point is that they made the choice to go and seek the oil to fill their flask. One might have called out the idea to the others earlier in the day and at least four followed through with this good idea. Did the other five just get distracted? Did they think they could rely on the others’ supply from the get – go? I think that because five are called “wise,” that we can assume that they did work out what they would need before the watch began. The other five are caught short of oil. First they want a part of the others’ flask reserves –but that won’t work. They head out to bang on shop doors that will be closed. They scramble for more oil, but the middle of the night with only a few minutes to spare, is not the time to make up for lost opportunity. This is a parable, so no real bridesmaids were hurt in the telling of this story. But it is a warning: be a wise bridesmaid, people!

Being prepared, keeping your lamp lit, your flask of oil full sounds like a fairly simple concept – but what does that look like for us? There are immediate ways we keep our lamps lit and the reserve oil flasks full. One way is the way that we each work inwardly on our relationship with Christ. Like each bridesmaid, we have choices about how we prepare to encounter Christ each day and how we prepare to meet him upon his return. The foolish way would be to just check the boxes and go through the motions. The things that put you in place, but not with great anticipation: but the parable tells us just showing up may not be enough. What are you doing that fills you with joy as a disciple? How are you building up the Kingdom of God as you wait for Jesus to return? Do you hear the call of other bridesmaids to grab a flask and fill it with extra oil? Look around at the community and see what the disciples are doing: how you can work with your fellow bridesmaids at Grace to get ready and with anticipation: feed the hungry, pray for the afflicted, visit the prisoner, invest your five talents (okay, I am mixing parables...) we’ve got a lot to do to prepare! Another way we keep our lamps lit is the way in which we support of one another as we wait. Waiting can be hard. There are disappointments, setbacks, and discouragements. But as a community of faith, we lean into times of mourning or disaster together. We hold one another up in prayer, we reach out with help, we comfort and nourish in hard times. There are times when our own lamp may grow dim – even go out, but our community will help us to remember who we are waiting for and why we are waiting. There is a wedding feast to go to and the bridegroom is coming, and you may need someone to pass you a lighter to help you get your lamp lit again. The final way we keep our lamps lit is through centering our community at Grace on the Eucharist – this wedding feast we prepare in celebration of Jesus’ presence with us and in us. We do this well at Grace and it is no accident or insincere puffery. The beauty of our worship is a celebration of the past, present, and future we have in Christ. It comes from our hearts, full with joy for our salvation and with joy in the anticipation of the Kingdom to come. The baptisms celebrated today are part of that joy in preparing – the newest generation of disciples is present and ready to begin their watch for the bridegroom. They will become a part of this tradition of reminding one another of the many ways to be a wise bridesmaid, to keep their flasks of oil full.

As a community, we are calling out to one another the many ways to get a flask for extra oil and fill it to the top. We do not know how long this wait is going to be. Listen to the wise bridesmaids and get your flask filled early in the day while the shops are open, while you have plenty of time to get out to the shops. Don’t just wait - *look forward* to the bridegroom’s arrival like a Tanzanian village would welcome their long-awaited guest. If we want to want our lamps lit and our flasks full of oil like that, we have a lot to do to prepare. Amen.