

Jesus said, "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. (Matthew 25:1-13)

*Christian discipleship is about learning to live our lives in gratitude, as a response to God's love made known to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. At the core of Jesus' teaching ministry was what he called "the Kingdom of God." He taught his disciples to pray for that kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. He said that those with eyes to see and ears to hear would be able to discern signs of God's reign if we had enough imagination to know how and where to look for it. It's like a mustard seed that starts small and then grows into something much larger. Or like the yeast that a woman kneads into the bread to make the whole loaf rise. Or like a father who welcomes his lost son back home and serves up veal piccata for everyone.*

Because Matthew is the most Jewish of the four gospel writers, he doesn't like to say the word "G-d" out loud. So when he speaks about "the kingdom of *heaven*" it is important to know that he isn't talking about heaven as a place "out there" but that he is simply translating Jesus' message for his particular community. So today we overhear Matthew reminding his congregation that "the kingdom of heaven" will be like this:

There were ten bridesmaids: five of them were "wicked smart" and five of them "not so much." They were all waiting for the groom to arrive for the wedding. This is code language in early Christian-speak to refer to the return of Christ. But he was delayed, and they were all getting exhausted and they all fell asleep (because it doesn't matter much whether you are smart or not, we all need to sleep sometimes.) But then in the middle of the night there is a shout: it's time! The bridegroom (that's Jesus) has returned! But only five of them are ready when that shout goes out to go out to light their lanterns and meet him. (This is in the days before Duracell batteries so you had to make sure you had enough oil to light your lantern; but the dumb ones forgot to bring oil.) They want to borrow some from the others, but the smart ones said, "no way! We came prepared and you didn't. Go get your own oil!" So the five wise bridesmaids go into the wedding banquet (early Christian code-language for the ultimate banquet and celebration at the end of days) while the others go out to Walmart to get their oil. But by the time they get back it's too late: the door is shut and locked. There is no room for them. *The end!* "So keep awake," Jesus says to his disciples.

It's an interesting ending since they were all asleep when the shout went out; we expect Jesus to offer up the Boy Scout's motto of "be prepared" but maybe that's part of what being awake is all about. In any case, the crux of this allegory revolves around that oil. In all other ways, by outward appearances, the ten bridesmaids are the same. They are all dressed up for the party, all part of the community of the Church. All proclaim the mystery of faith: *Christ has died, Christ is*

*risen, Christ will come again.* In fact, this parable is a lot like the story of the wheat and the tares. It's not about Christians over and against the world: it's about how *within the Christian community* there are those who are wise followers of Christ and others who simply claim to be followers of Jesus but are really just along for the ride.

Now I'll be honest: I'm not too crazy about this kind of parable. I get it and I believe it: we will all be judged. I take great comfort, however, in knowing our judge is full of compassion and mercy. So I think that the Church (and especially clergy) needs to be clear that the final judgment is in God's hands, not ours. It is tempting for the Church to try to separate the wheat and the tares, the sheep from the goats, the wise and the foolish, the faithful from the unfaithful. But ultimately that work belongs to God, not to us.

For an allegory to work it has to paint the extremes: foolish and wise. Most of us, I would submit to you, fall somewhere in between those two poles: we are far from wise but smarter than fools. Perhaps an allegory is intended to give us all a bit of a swift kick, a "wake up call"—and if that is correct then Jesus' last words make perfect sense. In any event, I think that the work of the Church is to invite everyone to the banquet and to proclaim boldly that "all are welcome." I am pretty sure that Matthew's community would have agreed with that as well, and quite confident that Jesus himself would do so.

But it doesn't take long when you are part of a community to begin to learn that some really are along for the ride. Some like the bridesmaids' dresses or the liturgical garb or the dignity of the liturgy or a certain style of music; but they have very little interest in actually taking up their crosses to follow Jesus. They want the outward signs without any inward transformation. They want discipleship without the costs. They want Easter Sunday without Good Friday.

Judgment belongs to God—not the Church. But elsewhere in Matthew's gospel it is clear what the criteria are that God will use: it's not about who says, "Lord, Lord" (that phrase comes up here as it does in the parable of the sheep and the goats.) It's not about confessional statements or creeds but about action and deeds. It's about how we walked the talk. It's about how we cared for "the least of these" among us: the hungry, the naked, the homeless, those in prison.

In the Old Testament, the rabbis saw *oil* as a reference to deeds of love and mercy, as a metaphor for obedience to Torah and specifically the two great commandments to love God and neighbor. We are so used to thinking about oil as a commodity: as that which we need to put in the tank to heat our homes this winter. And with commodities there is always a limited supply: if I have more that means you have less. But notice that this story is not about there being, let's say, one gallon of lamp oil and the five wise ones keeping it all for themselves and not letting the foolish ones have any. The truth is that there is plenty of oil in this story. It's just that the wise ones are ready and have it with them; while the foolish ones left theirs at home or forgot to buy it. Maybe here is where it's helpful to modernize the story and talk about batteries, especially if you find yourself wondering why the wise ones don't just share. If you've got batteries in your flashlight and the person next to you doesn't it does no good to try to take one battery out to share it with somebody else: you both wind up in the dark.

That oil is really about how you choose to live your one, wild and precious life and that is one thing that can't be done *for* someone else—not even those we love the most. The foolish bridesmaids have forgotten who they are: they've forgotten that their calling as people living the paschal mystery is to illumine the darkness. That is what it means to be awake and wait for Christ: not to sit around but to do justice and love mercy. They miss the ultimate opportunity and purpose of their lives. It is futile to go out and try to “get your oil” after the bridegroom's arrival simply because it is simply too late then. You don't get a do-over on your life.

So we find ourselves to be members of a Body where all are truly welcome, but our work here is also about constantly extending the invitation that invites each and every person here to take the next steps in the journey toward discipleship by moving from guest to host by becoming wise bridesmaids, with God's help. Each of us must decide what we will do with that which God has entrusted to us because God has given all of us “oil” –which is to say a certain amount of time to be on this earth and gifts that are unique to us and resources (both spiritual and financial) that are meant to be used for the sake of God's kingdom. That oil is intended as a gift that we are meant to use to lighten up the world around us. Some days we get that and are wise enough to let our light shine, and other days we are pretty foolish and forget what the point of discipleship is. But when we do let our light shine, then the world knows that we are Christians by our love.

Today we enter a period of three weeks where we turn our attention to financial matters in this parish. Our conversation will culminate with the creation of this parish's budget for mission and ministry in 2009. That budget is about far more than the oil we put into our tank to heat this building, although that is a very real consideration since it is in this building that we gather to worship and to teach our children and grandchildren and to raise them to the full stature of Christ. Here is where we form disciples to light up our homes and workplaces and schools as instruments of God's peace. But that “oil” is also about the work we do to illumine the world by sharing what we have with others far and near: in places like El Salvador or through Heifer Project or the Welcome Aldrich Fund or the Wachusett Food Pantry or the Mustard Seed. It's about opening the doors at St. Clare House for Alanon and Alateen.

For some these three weeks of speaking honestly about money will be the longest three weeks of the year. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. To my way of thinking about it, though, these weeks are not very different than a family that sits at the kitchen table to make a budget together. It's not always fun but it's important to have the conversation about where our money will be spent. We do our best here at St. Francis to live within our means by setting priorities that we pray are faithful to our core values as a community. My only lingering worries each fall are about people who are brand new; people who may be visiting us for the first time today and they walk in and think, “my God, all that Church does is talk about money!”

Please know that we don't. What we do talk a lot about here is faithful discipleship, and as ordained and lay leaders we believe that financial stewardship is one of the marks of that walk with Christ, one aspect of that larger mission of forming faithful disciples. That is why clergy and vestry pledge before we ask the rest of the congregation to do so. It is tempting to think that we are here as consumers of a religious product. Sometimes that is manifest by an expectation (sometimes explicit but more often implicit) that we come to church to have our own needs met by the clergy or the staff or the vestry. We end up coming here to be served, rather than to serve.

It sounds funny, I admit; it doesn't sound like the gospel Jesus proclaimed but you might be surprised at how common that way of thinking really is. But when that is our vision of the Kingdom, then stewardship time feels a lot like a "tax"—or maybe like paying for a service like a college tuition payment or cable television or even public radio. Sometimes people try to use their pledge as a way of registering their complaints about the rector or vestry or some program. But all of those ways of thinking miss the point.

To be follower of Jesus Christ—to be a living member of Christ's body—is to be called to *share* in the work of ministry. That is a very different kind of vision. Those words on the top of our bulletins each week are meant to be words that come off the page and are enfleshed in this community—words that wake us up and remind us that the world needs for us to be the Church. The world needs for us to be that light that shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the early 1940s, once said, "the Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members." It helps to remember that during stewardship season.

And that, I think, is the connection to this parable today: the oil is given not as an end in itself but as a means to an end. Our "oil"—which is simply to say all that we are and all that we have—is not for hoarding or leaving at home or saving for a rainy day. It is meant to be used in ways that make the Reign of God manifest in our world. If we keep that in mind over the course of these next three weeks, and indeed into a new year of mission and ministry, all will be well.

Keep awake! Stay alert! And pray that we might be a congregation filled with wise bridesmaids, with God's help.