

Ten Bridesmaids

In today's Gospel from Matthew, we have another of Jesus' parables, another time Jesus is explaining what Heaven will be like. In this one, we have 10 bridesmaids—five wise and five foolish, each with a lamp—and a bridegroom taking his time getting to the wedding banquet. It took him so long that the foolish bridesmaids' lamps ran out of oil and they had to hurry to get more. So, they weren't there when the bridegroom finally arrived. They missed out on the banquet.

We know that Jesus used parables as a way of teaching, as a way of getting people to understand complex ideas by using scenes and objects that would be familiar to them. When I hear a parable, my mind often takes funny leaps, probably because those things that were familiar to people 2000 years ago aren't necessarily familiar to us today. In this case, I immediately wondered why the bridegroom was wandering around on his wedding day, probably at night because the lamps were needed to light the way to the wedding banquet, and what oil merchant would be open for business at night? And then almost immediately, I remember that the point of the parable is not to take the scene literally, but to look to what Jesus is teaching us.

Just in case you were wondering, like me, in those days it was the custom for the bridegroom to come to the bride's house to gather her, her family, and her attendants and bring them all to the wedding banquet. And maybe the oil merchant was still open because it was dusk, not dead of night, or maybe oil merchants were always open for business because people might run out of oil at any moment. But of course, that's not the point.

So, what is the point? What is Jesus teaching us in this parable? The standard interpretation is that the bridegroom is Jesus and we, the bridesmaids, should be alert and constantly prepared for the Second Coming, because we don't know when that will be. And those who are foolish enough to not be prepared will miss out on the wedding feast, which is Heaven. But is that really all there is to this parable? If so, it reminds me of Aesop's Fable, the Grasshopper and the Ant. The grasshopper spends the whole summer enjoying the sun and playing his fiddle, while the ant scurries around gathering food for the winter. When winter finally comes, the ant refuses to share his bounty with the grasshopper who is left out in the cold. That seems a bit like the wise bridesmaids who were prepared for the long wait and then refused to share their oil with the foolish bridesmaids, who then missed the banquet.

That doesn't fit my conception of Heaven and of a God who welcomes everyone into the banquet, the foolish and the wise, the prepared and the unprepared, those who share and those who don't. So, let's look at this parable from a different perspective. What if the Second Coming that we are preparing for isn't about Jesus returning to Earth? What if the preparation is about creating Heaven here on Earth, now, in our time and in our place? There is support for this perspective – most strongly seen in the Lord's Prayer where we ask for God's will to be on Earth as it is in Heaven. When we pray those words, aren't we really asking God to help us do

whatever it takes to make that happen? We don't know when that prayer will come to full fruition, but our preparation, our efforts are directed toward that end.

How do we do that? How do we keep our lamps full and our focus on the work we are given to do? There are many ways, but this time of year we have one significant opportunity right in front of us. We each recently got a letter asking to make our prayerful pledge in support of the work of All Saints Church. The letter explains the work and how our pledges of money support that work. Next week is the ingathering, where we bring our pledges to the table and ask God to bless them and our efforts as All Saints community in bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to Earth.

You may remember me giving you my definition of Stewardship—everything I do, with everything I have, all the time. This fall pledge campaign is one very important part of Stewardship. It allows us to pledge the use of our time, talent, and treasure toward the work we do together as the community of All Saints. So, this week, spend some time thinking about those things and what you want to pledge in support.

Let's look at them one at a time. First—time. Time is a non-renewable resource, and it is precious. We have only 24 hours in any day, and we decide how to use those hours. We have family, work, friends, time for ourselves. What time do you want to give to the All Saints community? It might be closely tied to your talent, the gifts God has given you, but it doesn't have to be. There are lots of ways to use your precious time and valuable gifts in service to God here at All Saints.

Look at what it takes to keep All Saints operating. Could you be a Sunday School teacher or helper? Did you know we have a very few, very dedicated adults who run our Godly Play program every Sunday? They are with the children and youth and not in church with us; maybe you could be part of that team so that everyone can attend church sometimes.

Look at the altar. A very few, very dedicated people set the table for every service and then clean up after. The Altar Guild could use a few more people so that the same people aren't responsible every Sunday for every service. What about the choir? You don't have to be a trained musician to participate in this very important ministry! In fact, the choir is usually the most fun group of people in any congregation, and we would love to have you join us! You could volunteer time to water the plants every week, to set up the coffee and tea and clean up the kitchen after each service. Marlin might love some help printing the bulletins each week. It takes more commitment, but you might feel called to serve on the Vestry, as Clerk to the Vestry, or as Treasurer. We need people willing to visit and take communion to those who are unable to attend services in person. You might want to be a sub-deacon, reader or acolyte – both young people and adults! A few times each year, we have opportunities to help with clean up, both inside and outside the church building. There are lots of opportunities to pledge your time and talent.

Now, let's talk about money. Why must we always talk about money? Two reasons: first, because it is important—money is the topic Jesus talked about most because it is important to our spiritual health; and second, because it is hard to talk about. Maybe the better question is, why don't we talk more about money? Money is the way we value things. Look at how someone spends money, and you'll have some insight into what is important to that person. Money and how we use it engender lots of emotion: discomfort, fear, shame, pride, joy, worry, anger. Think for a minute what comes up for you when I mention money. What is your reaction to All Saints asking you to **pledge** your money for the church's work? Giving is important, but pledging is even more so.

I'll tell you why I pledge to All Saints. First, it's important for All Saints. It needs to know how much oil it has for its lamp as it does its work. My pledge allows the church to budget its resources wisely over the coming year. But more than that, my pledge is important for me. It forces me to put my priorities in order. It is part of my being constantly prepared for the Kingdom of Heaven or keeping my lamp full. Pledging means making a priority of the work we do together as All Saints. I don't just give whenever and whatever is left over after my other needs and wants are met. I give off the top, first, to what is the most important to me. It's a bit like magic, but it's really just a shift in perspective.

You've probably seen or heard of the example of someone who has three buckets: one with large rocks, one with pebbles and one with sand. The object is to fit all the contents of the three buckets into one container. If I put the sand in first, then the pebbles, I won't have room for the large rocks. I will only succeed if I put the large rocks in first. The pebbles go in second and they fill in the larger spaces around the large rocks. The sand goes in last and it seeps into all the smaller spaces, until everything is packed into one container.

My commitment to God and the work of bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to Earth is the largest rock, so to be successful, I must put it in first. Then, magically, I can fit all the other rocks, pebbles and sand of my life into the container. To paraphrase Jesus when he said, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God," keep your lamp full and focus on the Kingdom and all the rest will fall into place. It's one of God's promises to us and it works. I challenge you to try it and see. Along with your pledge of time and talent, take this week to order your priorities and make a pledge of your financial resources to All Saints and our common work. Then bring those pledges next week and join the whole community in giving thanks to God.

All we have and all we are comes from God. All God asks in return is that we pledge ourselves to creating God's Kingdom on Earth so that everyone can enjoy the banquet. Go, fill your lamps, make your pledge and let's bring God's Kingdom to Earth! **Amen!**

Toni Marie Sutliff

Twenty-fourth Sunday After Pentecost – Year A

Wisdom 6:12-16 * Psalm 78:1-7 * Thessalonians 4:13-18 * Matthew 25:1-13

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