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Matthew 25:1-13

The second coming isn't something we tend to spend a lot of time on in the so-called mainline protestant religions. We tend to leave that to other Christians – the ones who seem to have detailed knowledge of the day and the hour. We believe Jesus will come again, that there will be a final judgement, and that God's ways will ultimately reign, but we don't have the sense of urgency about that the early Christians had.

The earliest Christians believed that Jesus was coming back in their lifetime. Well before Matthew was writing, we hear Paul this morning trying to calm the nerves of the Thessalonians who are worried that Jesus hasn't returned yet. By the time Matthew is writing, well after the death of Jesus, that return is significantly delayed. Matthew's audience has come through persecution and occupation and hard times to live together as followers of Jesus and they are anxiously awaiting his return. Matthew is trying to inspire his audience to remain vigilant even in the face of this unexpected delay.

Fast forward 2,000 years and the challenge of hearing this text today is clear. Most of us aren't waiting anxiously and eagerly for Jesus' imminent return. It is part of our story, but we aren't expecting it anytime soon.

So, what do we make of this odd parable? With its snarky bridesmaids who refuse to share their oil with the ones who run short? With the door that is slammed shut in the faces of the 5 who weren't fully prepared for the party? This doesn't sound much like the kingdom of Heaven that we have been hearing about – a place of inclusion and special care for the poor and

the sick and the unprepared. Jesus ate with sinners and healed the less than perfect. But here we are left with the words “I don’t know you.”

Ouch.

But remember that the parables are meant to shock, to puzzle the hearer, to shake us up. I wonder how this parable might be trying to shake us up this morning.

Let’s look at the bridesmaids. We hear right out of the gate that there are two kinds of bridesmaids – the wise and the foolish. What makes this distinction? The only difference is that the wise bridesmaids are prepared for the long wait before the bridegroom arrives and the foolish ones are not. The foolish ones run out of oil and they are out searching for more when the bridegroom arrives. The wise ones were prepared for a long wait. They knew they needed a good supply of oil as they waited in hope of the big banquet.

Like the bridesmaids, each one of us needs a good supply of oil. We need to be vigilant about keeping our lamps lit, keeping our hope in the promises of God alive. Our faith isn’t something we run out and get when we realize we are going to be left out of the party. It isn’t reserved for certain days of the week or certain circumstances or religious rituals. It’s a hope that we always carry deep within us, hope in God’s promise to one day welcome us to the banquet of God’s reign.

It’s not easy to stay ready. Truth be told the wise and the foolish lives inside of each one of us at any given time. It is a challenge to live in the promise of hope in the face of such desolation all around us. Jesus told us in the beatitudes last week that we may even suffer for it. But it is worth it. We believe that in the fullness of time, Jesus will return and, as it says in the book of Revelation:

“he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”
Rev 21:4

Until that time, we are the ones who must point toward God in everything that we do. That’s how we stay prepared for the final banquet that God promises. That is the oil that fills our lamps.

We fill our lamps with our daily kindnesses. We stay prepared by slowing down and being mindful of the people around us. We carry the oil of hope within us when we watch our language – how we talk about one another and to one another. We prepare for the final party by encouraging the people around us to be all that God created them to be. We stay ready by making time to refuel, by intentional living that allows for quiet prayer and contemplation and for noticing where God might be present in even the most unlikely places. Each of us is encouraged by the words of today’s gospel to be people of hope.

As a congregation we fill our lamps by gathering for worship. We come together to remember our stories and to fill up on God’s word. We prepare for the ultimate banquet by growing in hospitality. We carry the hope of God’s promise within when we remember that we are all one in Christ, that we all have different gifts and different quirks! And all together that makes up the beautiful tapestry that is St. Barnabas.

How do we stay prepared in our neighborhoods? All through Matthew’s gospel, we have heard how to stay prepared. We wait in hope for the ultimate party when we welcome the stranger as Jesus did, when we feed the hungry, visit the sick and imprisoned. We prepare by refusing to give into cynicism, by continuing to work toward a world where all are fed and clothed and housed and welcomed to the table. We fill our lamps with oil in anticipation of the

great banquet when we keep coming back to the promises we made in Baptism: to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. To strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

The words of today's gospel call us to wait in joyful hope, prepared, dressed for the party, lamps full of oil and hearts on fire. As we wait for the ultimate banquet, may we be mindful this week of the ways that God is present in our waiting. May we dare be bearers of hope in a world full of despair.