Matthew 25:1-13

1 ‘Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten maidens took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6But at midnight there was a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” 7Then all those maidens[\*](javascript:void(0);) got up and trimmed their lamps. 8The foolish said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” 9But 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.” 10And 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. 11Later the other maidens came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open to us.” 12But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” 13Be vigilant, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

**What’s in Your Lamp?**

There’s a popular TV advertisement for a credit card, and the saying that keeps coming up in the commercial is “What’s in your wallet?” The ad is trying to make the point that not all credit cards are the same, and that theirs offers more benefits and less embarrassment when you use it. Today, I’d like to pose the question, “What’s in your lamp?”

Some explanation of Jewish wedding customs in first century Palestine is in order. Marriage was not generally the result of extended courtship followed by a romantic proposal by the man to the woman; usually a marriage was arranged by the fathers of those to be betrothed. Minimum age was thirteen for the man and twelve for the woman. Betrothal took place at the home of the bride as the fathers hashed out an agreement and a “bride price” was negotiated. The betrothal could occur years before the actual wedding, as was the case with Mary and Joseph. The final “settlement” took place on the night of the wedding, when the groom visited the bride’s home and came to a formal agreement with the father, making final payments. These final negotiations could take some time, as anyone who has ever worked in sales that involve extended contracts can attest. Anyway, once the negotiations were concluded, the wedding ceremony could commence. The ceremony mostly involved the transfer of the bride from her parents’ home to that of the her in-laws. A wedding party of maidens would meet the bride and groom outside the groom’s family home and escort them in the dark, using lamps, to the groom’s family home where the wedding feast would commence. Because of the potential complications involved in transferring “ownership” of the woman, we could understand how the bride and groom might be delayed in their return the groom’s home, but once the rendezvous with the maidens took place, you would witness a joyful procession in the dark as the wedding party made its way to the feast.

In the parable Jesus tells his disciples, ten maidens carrying oil lamps have gone from the groom’s home at night to meet the wedding party, but the party is delayed. When at midnight someone sees the light of the approaching bridegroom, five of the maidens realize that they didn’t bring extra oil for their lamps and ask the other five to share some oil, but the maidens who brought extra oil say that they can’t share theirs because it won’t be enough to keep their lamps going from their rendezvous point to the groom’s home. Presumably there was a convenience store somewhere in the vicinity because the five prepared maidens tell the unprepared to go out and buy some oil. So five maidens meet the wedding party and go into the groom’s home for the wedding feast while the others presumably find some oil only to return to locked doors. When they plead to be admitted to the feast, the groom says, “I do not know you.” The moral of the story: make sure you carry enough oil.

Of course this story has a broader meaning. In the 24th chapter of Matthew, Jesus speaks extensively about the end of the world, the coming of the Son of Man when the faithful will be separated from the wicked, the faithful being carried off with Christ and the wicked going to that dreadful place where there will be a whole lot of “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Today’s reading concerns being prepared for that coming of Christ, making sure that you have enough oil to keep your lamp lit, or your light shining, until Jesus returns. Jesus is the bridegroom in today’s parable. The church, that is you and I, are the maidens awaiting his coming. Some will be vigilant and prepared for Christ’s coming. Some won’t.

A few questions could be raised here, like, why couldn’t the maidens without enough oil simply tag along with those who had oil, using the light from the other lamps to guide their way?” I mean, they’re all friends, right? Isn’t it the Christian way to share with our less vigilant brothers and sisters? And why would the groom lock the door on the unprepared maidens when they finally return to the groom’s home, saying, “I don’t know you”? Would Jesus truly deny salvation to those who are less vigilant? Doesn’t sound like a God of grace at work here, does it?

As much comfort as we gain from telling ourselves that God is gracious and forgiving and loving, which he is, Jesus is making a strong statement about the quality of a relationship here. These maidens who await the coming of the groom would have known that the groom might be delayed; they should have carried extra oil. Their failure to do so speaks of more than a mere oversight; it speaks of carelessness, literal carelessness; they cared less than they should have. This is an important ceremony for the groom – indeed it’s the most important day in his life. The night procession to his family home with bride and maidens was a glorious spectacle to the parents and guests. Imagine the embarrassment if none of the maidens had enough oil. Imagine the disappointment of the groom and his family and the community to see a procession led by one or two lamps. Imagine how you would feel at your own wedding if half of the groomsmen or bridesmaids showed up…or if half of them showed up in blue jeans and tee shirts. How would you feel? For these maidens to not have enough oil says volumes about the quality of their relationship to the groom and the bride. They expected that the groom would arrive according to their own time table, and thus they carried what they thought was enough oil. I expect you could hear some of them saying to the bride and groom, “it’s not my fault that you took so long to arrive,” implying of course that it’s the fault of the bride and groom. These ill-prepared maidens had a friendship with limits, with conditions. They were prepared to wait only as long as their supply of oil would last.

Nearly two thousand years have passed since Jesus spoke this parable, and though false prophets predicting Christ’s imminent arrival rise and quickly fall, we are still waiting for the groom. The question is: “How’s your oil holding out?” Is your light still shining? Are you still carrying your cross? Are you showing your faith by loving your neighbor, even your enemy, as yourself? To insist on hating or holding grudges is to confess that you don’t have enough oil in your lamp – you have allowed it to go out, saying, “this is the best I can do.” And whatever excuses we would like to make, ultimately our failure to love others is our failure to love Christ. We cannot distinguish, for inasmuch as you’ve failed to love the least of these, you’ve failed to love Jesus (Matthew 25:40). To take this one step further, to despise another person is to despise Jesus.

We could all claim to have a deficiency of oil in our lamps, and this should bother us. We should not shrug our shoulders and say, “Oh well. I’m doing the best I can.” Christ died that we might have new life not bound to our petty fears, jealousies, rivalries, and conflicts. If we pray “thy kingdom come” in all sincerity, we must do everything we can to fill our lamps and keep them lit, to shine the light of Christ in the darkest of nights, to truly reign in God’s kingdom in our community. Our first step should be repentance – confession of our sins and a desire to change. Rabbi Eliezer taught his disciples, "Repent one day before your death." One of them then asked, "How will we know when that day is?" To which he replied, "All the more reasons to repent today, lest you die tomorrow."

The next step is discipleship – disciplining yourself to become a new creation. For this you need prayer. You need time in God’s word. You need the help of strong Christian brothers and sisters who can love you through your weaknesses and failures and guide you in your spiritual growth. Seek out those people. Don’t wait. Get connected to a fellowship that will nurture you and guide you on the path of righteousness. We all remain in need of God’s grace, which he amply supplies. But we measure our gratitude to God by our obedience to Christ, by our willingness to await his coming, and by keeping our lamps well supplied and brightly shining.