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Church of St. Benedict  
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Matthew 25:1-13

*what if the goal is the banquet?*

What would your friends think of you,  
if you were waiting outside the house for the wedding banquet to begin,  
and five of them didn't have enough oil in their lamps, to keep them burning,  
but you wouldn't share your oil because if you did, you wouldn't have enough for  
yourself.

The bridesmaids in this story seem so mean!

Why won't they share their oil?

And then who is this bridegroom, who won't open the door for the bridesmaids  
who weren't prepared?

Where is the kingdom of God in this story?

Didn't we just hear about the vineyard owner who paid everyone the same wage,  
even if they didn't do a full day's work?

Where is the mercy and forgiveness we want to associate with Jesus Christ and  
the love of God?

Maybe this is a parable about tough love.

We are each called to be accountable for our own lives,  
and no one can be accountable for the choices of someone else.

We are responsible for our own choices.

We are responsible for our own lives.

A friend of mine was discussing this passage with some children several years ago,

and they wondered together what it might mean.

One of the children said, “Maybe the oil is something you can’t share.

Maybe the oil is something everybody has to get for themselves, and no one else can get it for them.”

Whatever the oil is, and Jesus doesn’t exactly say,

faith, or helping others, or prayer,

maybe having it or keeping it can only be the choice of each person.

We can choose to get to know God, and who God is, and what God’s love means for us –

But we can’t give that to another person, we can’t force someone to love God.

We can’t give faith to someone else, or do good works for someone else.

“Maybe the oil is something you can’t share.

Maybe the oil is something everybody has to get for themselves, and no one else can get it for them.”

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There is also another way to read this story that I want to explore with you.

What if the oil in the parable isn’t Jesus’ point at all?

After all, Jesus says at the end of the parable: “Keep awake!”

He doesn’t say, “Keep those lamps lit, people!”

He says, “Keep awake.”

And ALL the bridesmaids fall asleep – not just the foolish ones.

What if the foolish bridesmaids are foolish, because they are running around worrying about keeping their lamps lit?

They leave the door to the banquet behind, and go looking for oil.

They leave the place where Jesus is going to show up...

Have you ever seen that bumper sticker, “Look busy, Jesus is coming”?

Being busy is a value in our society, and it’s allowed us to accomplish a lot.

But as Henri Nouwen says,

“Beneath all the great accomplishments of our time, there is a deep current of despair. While efficiency and control are the great aspirations of our society, the loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and a deep sense of uselessness fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world.”

Jesus says, “Keep awake,” not “Keep busy!”

Maybe we get distracted by those bright and burning lamps.

Maybe the tasks of our lives take over

as the measure of who we are in God’s eyes,

and we begin to define ourselves by what we DO,

instead of who we are,                      and whose we are.

Are we defined by making sure we keep our lamp burning?

Or are we defined by the fact that we want to be a part of God’s banquet?

A place where the hungry are fed, where all are welcomed, where love is the rule and not power or success.

What if the wise bridesmaids were wise because didn't leave that door.

Sure, they had their oil –

they weren't daydreamers or naïve idealists –

but they were going to make sure they were at the door.

They knew what was real, what was worth waiting for.

What if the foolish bridesmaids had waited at the door?

What if they had stayed awake and stayed aware,

instead of running off after oil?

What if the goal of the Christian life is staying awake for the banquet?

After my sermon, Alice Henry is going to say a little bit about her experience of prayer and worship here at St. Benedict.

Prayer and worship are, really, forms of staying awake.

We sit still.            The world slows down.            Our minds wander in and out.

We don't really get anything done.

We aren't busy.

You might say that prayer and worship are ways that we do nothing “on purpose.”

so that we can try to pay attention to what God is doing.

Maybe God calls us to account for our choices,  
but also desires, more than anything,  
that we come inside the banquet, and sit at God's tables.

Let's not run around with our lamps too much.

Let's keep our hearts set by that door.

Let us remember what the good life looks like – a life lived in God.

A life lived in a way perhaps not so different from the life we seek to live here  
together:

A life lived in hope

in Hospitality, Outreach, Prayer and Worship, and

Enthusiasm?

Let us stay awake together, because we are invited to a banquet.

And we don't want to miss it.

Amen.