Sermon *Got Oil?*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 11.8.26

Wisdom of Solomon 6:17-20
Canticle 13
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

If you only read one chapter of the entire Bible this year, please read Matthew 25. This Sunday and the next two Sundays we are going to read every word of it. For me, it's hard to imagine a more important chapter in our spiritual lives than Matthew 25. To put it into context, Matthew 1 – 24 talk about the greatness of God in Jesus Christ, why He is worthy of praise, how we can trust him with our spiritual and eternal lives, and that we are forgiven, over and over again. We then have Matthew 25, which I'll get to in a moment. Then in chapter 26 Jesus is betrayed, then put on trial, crucified, died, and then rose again. Matthew 25 is the hinge between all who God is and all that God has done, is doing, and will for us. And what Jesus did, how our sins are forgiven, and how God resurrected Him, and therefore the rest of us, to new life.

Matthew 25 is what God asks of us. Jesus does this with a parable and two stories. The parable today is of the five wise and five foolish bridesmaids – the wise brought extra oil, the foolish did not. Now, this is a tradition that we no longer do at weddings in North America. But, back then, the bridesmaids would wait for the groom and accompany him to the reception. In this parable, the groom was late. Really, really late. The sun had set, they got tired, and all (focus on all) of them fell asleep. In the middle of the night, the groom arrives. The bridesmaids with extra oil lit their lamps and processed the groom to the party. The others sought out oil and arrived late to the party. The door was closed. They knocked and called out: Lord, Lord, let us in. The groom answered: I do not know you.

It is believed that the groom is Jesus. The party is the Kingdom of Heaven at the end of time (or our lives, whichever comes first). The wise were in; the foolish were out. Period. Let that sink in for a minute, the groom/Jesus said: I do not know you.

It's chilling. And frankly, it gets worse. Because it's not the first time Jesus used that phrase.

This summer I went on sabbatical and the main thing I did was study Matthew 5, 6, 7 – otherwise known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus ended the sermon (which began with "blessed are the peacemakers, the merciful, those who mourn…") with this: Many will come to me and say, "Lord, Lord, we taught in your name, we did miracles and healed in your name" and I will say to them, "Depart from me, I do not know you."

Technically, Matthew wrote in Greek: I have not known you, I do not know you, I will not know you.

What does it mean when Jesus says to us he doesn't know us?

In Matthew 7, Jesus knows those who are humble and vulnerable in their prayer life. The ones who boast – look, we taught, healed, and did miracles in your name, you owe us – are not known by Jesus. Matthew 25 takes a different look at this.

Let's take a look at the lamp, the flame and the oil. I believe these are symbols. The lamp is our body. The flame is the outward shining of our faith life – the stuff that others can see about what we believe and how we behave. The oil is the inward spiritual life that people do not see. It is our daily prayers, our mediation on Scripture, it is how we treat others when no one is looking. The oil is replenished by our faith practices – going to church, singing, turning everything over to God in prayer, reading scripture, serving at the church, giving of ourselves, forgiving (or practicing forgiving) others. That's the oil and that's how it gets replenished. The flame, again, is our external faith life but it doesn't burn without the oil in the lamp.

Going back to the parable, the foolish without oil did nothing to bring extra oil. In this example, they didn't do their prayers, they didn't seek to forgive, they didn't go to church, or sing hymns, or treat others well even when no one is looking. They were out of oil. They had no flame. Therefore, the groom did not know them. Jesus does not know them. The door to the party was shut.

What is the purpose of All Angels? To provide oil to your lamp. We do this on Sunday with joyful worship, during our fellowship time, in our discussion groups, our bible studies, our outreach events, in choir, on the Altar Guild and other ways to serve. We produce oil for your lamps. Matthew 25 asks: are you there to receive it?

Although the parable says there are two types of people in this world: those with oil and those without, there is an "all" in the story. All of them fell asleep. All of them. What is sleeping in the parable. It means they didn't expect the groom to be late; but he was. Really, really late. How long have you ever waited for a bride or groom? All night? Probably not. But, in this exaggerated story (for effect), they waited so long they all fell asleep. What this tells me is that Jesus is being real frank about what it is to follow God. You're going to fall asleep. You're going to wait. You are going to wonder: where in the world is God!?! And then you'll have to wait some more. Theologians have called this the "dark night of the soul" and we all, ALL, go through it.

What gets us through the dark night of the soul? Oil. How do we get the oil? Not when we need it but when we're feeling good. We go to church, we pray, we sing, we practice (and fail at times) our faith. That's where we get the oil. And we're going to need it. All of us are going to need it.

In Matthew 7:24, the people who said to the Lord, "Look at all that we've done in your name" but Jesus said to them, "I do not know you." I believe the passage is point to our faith life should be centered around vulnerability to God in prayer and humility with one another. The people in Jesus' story were boasting about what they did in Jesus's name and that, my reading here, Jesus owed them a place in His Kingdom. Jesus doesn't know us when we're boasting, He knows us when we are humble in heart and vulnerable to Him in prayer. In today's passage that ends with, "I do not know you," it is because their faith – the light of the lamp – was not visible to Him. Boasting doesn't fill our proverbial lamp with oil. It is our faith practice that does. At the core of our faith tradition is vulnerability to God, dependency on God, and humility with one another.

Here's something else to consider – the flame from one candle to the next looks the same, but, for our expression of faith, each person's flame (faith) looks different. And, collectively, I believe that each church, each congregation, has a unique flame of faith. Each church looks different but it's all shining in faith. There was a time in Church history when it was believed each faith/flame should be the same but thankfully in the 21st century we now see that uniqueness is important for each House of Worship.

I've been thinking lately about Don Judd. He passed away a couple of years ago but the memory of him, and his impact on me and the church, is still around. Don was a medical doctor, and I imagine he had a wonderful bedside manner. He was humble, approachable, and also very skilled and full of wisdom. However, you saw his wisdom – his flame – in how he treated people and not in how he boasted about it. Don had shared with me, and others, of his own questions of faith. It'll happen to anyone who practices medicine. He has questions; we all have questions; but the thing about Don is that he showed up. He sang in the choir, he'd climb up a ladder, he do whatever needed to be done to help the mission and ministry of All Angels. And I miss him. I miss his flame, his faith, and his dedication. His flame of faith looked different to others but he tended the flame by participating in church, the prayers, and thinking and meditating on Scripture and the mysteries of science and faith.

Don Judd and David Stasney (our Music Director) were close. They both have faith and it shines. But, their faith shines differently. Just like everyone else. Jesus doesn't say someone with this type of flame/faith is accepted and this one isn't. No; Jesus looks for the flame of faith in all our uniqueness. And, we fuel that flame by the oil of our faith practices and tradition.

At All Angels, we don't have to look like other churches. But we do have to prepare for the dark night of the soul. We have to prepare for our expectations of God to be changed. And it's the acts of faith and the joy and the peace and the hymns and all the things that we do here at All Angels that continue to add to our oil. It is how our light of faith shines as a light to others. It is that light that Jesus sees and says, "Come in. This is the kingdom of heaven. Come on in and celebrate."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.