

Nov. 8, 2020 (Proper 27A)
Church of the Ascension, Chicago, IL
Sermon by Seminarian Bonnie Scott
Matthew 25:1-13

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

The gospel passage today calls to mind a wedding. In normal times, such a situation would not be as hard to conjure as it is now—a time in which gatherings, closeness, and celebration are largely forbidden. And yet, our scene is first set on the outskirts of such a celebration, before the banquet has begun. Outside of the banquet hall, in the darkness and quiet of the night, ten bridesmaids wait expectantly for the bridegroom.

As they wait for him, the night overtakes them and they fall asleep. As the bridegroom finally approaches, they hear a shout from the darkness. Alerted to the bridegroom's presence, the 5 wise bridesmaids ready their lamps. The 5 foolish bridesmaids notice that their lamps are dimming; without oil reserves, their faces fade into the darkness. There is not enough oil to go around, and the foolish bridesmaids are forced to depart to find some of their own. When they return, the door to the banquet is shut. No matter how they beg and plead, they are barred from entry. The bridegroom tells them, "I do not know you."

When I reflect upon this scene, I am struck by the power of illumination. While we do not know exactly when Jesus—the bridegroom—approaches, we do know that after the midnight cry, the 5 bridesmaids already find their lamps dimming. Desperate to keep their lamps alight, they beg for the other women's oil. "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out!" The wise bridesmaids refuse—not because they don't wish to share, but because they *can't*. Their own lamps will fade, and all 10 bridesmaids will eventually be consumed by the darkness.

There are some things we possess which cannot be divided or shared. If asked, I can share my physical possessions—my food, my shelter, my money; I can even give advice, kindness, and love. But each of us has within us something indivisible, untouchable, unknowable even. I cannot give you my faith. I can't even show it to you—not in the way that I can reveal it to God. I can pray in front of you, bow my knees and bend onto a prayer bench; I can sing hymns, I can profess, I can sermonize. But there is a small, sacred space inside of me, folded into the contents of my being which I cling to at times like a cross. In this space, I am illuminated—I am seen. And who is it that can see me there, but the bridegroom?

But what if our faces dim, even in that sacred space? What if our oil has run dry? Has it dissipated because we forgot to replenish it, consumed with the weights put upon us by the world? Have we given ourselves over to worldly concerns? Have we succumbed to anger, to hatred, to our own pain? Have we failed to replenish our hearts with the love, gratitude, and forgiveness which God has offered? Have we dimmed that inner light such that we are unrecognizable, to ourselves and to Christ? If we have, no one can fill our lamps. No matter how much we beg them, or how much they wish they could.

This parable ends with a stark division; there are those who have entered the banquet with the bridegroom and those who are locked out. Those who are within the banquet are known to the Lord, and those who are excluded are not and are condemned to the darkness. It is a tragic enough story when taken at its face—for the seemingly small error of coming unprepared, the bridesmaids have been banished from the festivities. For their oversight, the bridesmaids are barred from the kingdom of heaven.

“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” By the time the bridesmaids heard the shout and knew that the bridegroom was approaching, it was too late. Rather than hearing of his arrival and feeling the joy of his presence, they hastened to prepare. *This* was the day. *This* was the hour. As much as we long for certainty, there is no way to know that the bridegroom is coming until we hear that midnight cry. In these times of trial, of fear, of anger, of brokenness, who among us does not want to know that God will welcome us into the kingdom of heaven, and that our entry is secured? It is up to us, then, in the darkness of this long night, to see that our light is on, for the bridegroom comes. Amen.