

Farmville Baptist Church
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Matthew 25:1-13
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May our Faithful Deeds Bring Healing

These sound like harsh words don't they? Today's passage is found only in the book of Matthew, leading some scholars to wonder if it was a parable of Jesus or if Matthew developed the story, loosely based on Jesus' teachings. Before we dig into the story itself, let's set it in its larger context.

Today we are in Matthew 25. Here is what happened in the last few chapters: in chapter 21, Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, he then cleanses the temple and curses the fig tree. In chapter 22 we find several of the passages we have looked at over the last few weeks: the strange parable about the wedding banquet, and the questions about paying taxes, the resurrection, and the greatest commandment.

Today's passage is part of what scholars call the judgment discourse that spans chapters 23-25. In chapter 23 we find 7 woes and the lament over Jerusalem

Chapter 24 begins with the prediction of the destruction of the temple, then continues with warnings that the end times will include persecutions, the sacrilege of the temple and false messiahs. Jesus warns – through the parables of the fig tree, the thief in the night, and the productive laborer – that believers should be watchful for his return.

After all of this gloom and doom we get to chapter 25 and a wedding story about 5 wise and 5 foolish bridesmaids or virgins – depending on the translation you read. Like the story of the wedding banquet that we dealt with a few weeks ago, this story can be interpreted as an allegory. (Like we talked about on Wednesday night, there are several other ways to view this passage.)

You may remember from several weeks ago, that in an allegory, each character stands for something or someone else. So from an allegorical perspective, who's who in this story today?

The Bridesmaids - notice that all the bridesmaids look the same, they all have lamps and oil, they all sleep. (Even though the parable ends with an admonition to stay awake – both the wise and foolish fall asleep – that's not the problem.) The problem is that only half are really prepared for the return of the bridegroom. Just as with churches and believers today – we can't immediately tell which are wise and which are foolish from external appearances.

The Groom and his delay – For Matthew's readers – the groom – Jesus - has already been delayed. Remember, early Christians believed that Jesus would return soon –within their lifetimes. That's one of the reasons that scholars believe that the first gospel wasn't written until 30 years or more after Jesus died. If Jesus was coming back soon, they didn't need to record his story for posterity. But now, it's thirty years later, and Jesus has not returned. The original eye-witnesses are passing away. I imagine that the believers realized that if they didn't capture the memories of the remaining eye witnesses, the stories would be lost.

The delay of Jesus' return also created questions and doubts for those early believers. By 50 CE – just 20 years after Jesus died, some of Paul's converts were growing restless. By the time 2 Peter was written in the second century, restlessness had turned to impatience and even scoffing. In this book, the author writes, "With the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but God is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." So Matthew is not predicting that the second coming may be delayed, he is dealing with it as a present reality in his faith community.

In this allegory, it is the oil that gives us the clue to the point of this story. Here, having oil is what really matters. The wise women have plenty, but the foolish ones do not. In the Jewish tradition, oil was often a symbol for good deeds. Seen this way, what will count is not whether we have been constantly “watching” for the second coming – think here about the Left Behind series and other movies you may have seen where people are obsessed about the return of Christ. What will count instead is whether or not we have been faithful in responsible deeds of discipleship – whether we are working to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth --**while we are waiting for Christ to return.**¹

What are these acts of faithful discipleship? Some scholars suggest that these three chapters in Matthew, chapters 23-25, should be read in concert with chapters 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount contains some of Jesus’ most radical teachings on what it means to be a faithful disciple – turn the other cheek, go the second mile, love your enemies. But in case we don’t make the connection, Matthew spells it out for us again at the end of chapter 25 where we find today’s story.

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave

you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,^[a] you did it to me.’

If we understand that the oil represents the good works that are a natural expression of our faith, it makes sense then why the wise women couldn't share their oil doesn't it? I can't take credit for Mac's good deeds, just as he can't take credit for Janett's or Sandy's.

This story offers a stern warning to those who claim to believe but don't live into their professed faith. But this story contains good news for those who both believe and live out their faith with diligence. One of the things that I have come to appreciate about this congregation over the last 10 months is that you do live out your faith. You take care of each other, and you are sensitive to the needs of those in the community.

Today, I am going to ask us to take that care and concern, those faithful acts of discipleship to the next level. We are a wounded and divided nation, in need of deep healing, and I believe with all my heart that the church must lead the way. This week, Canadian pastor Carey Neuhof suggested three things the culture needs right now that the church can provide. First, he says, *A Blaming Culture Needs A Confessing Church*. He acknowledges that when we see a problem, we would much rather assign blame than assume responsibility. We learn that early don't we? Even as children we are quick to deny our own misdeeds and blame our siblings. Confession, Neuhof suggests, bridges the gap between blame and responsibility.

Unlike many of our sister Baptist churches, we confess our sins regularly here, and that's a good thing. It is always appropriate to ask who have we hurt? Who have we mistreated, if anyone. If you're worried about your children or grandchildren watching the politicians and mimicking them, be assured that they are watching you

more closely. I encourage us all to examine ourselves, model for the world confessing our shortcomings, and committing ourselves to repentance and change. When we confess, when we say we are sorry, healing can begin. Let's commit ourselves to helping our nation move from anger and hate to health and healing.

Second, Neuwhof suggests, a divided nation needs a united church. One of Jesus' most important prayers was for unity, and at it's best, the early church was marked by a counter-cultural unity. A divided nation needs a united church. That doesn't mean that we all have to agree on everything, that will never happen, but Neuwhof warns that if we buy into the deepening divisions and partisanship that will continue for a while, the church will lose more ground in culture more quickly than ever before. However, if we can become a unifying force around an alternative mission (bringing in the Kingdom of God), the church can make a difference.

Finally Neuwhof suggests, an exhausted culture needs an alternative to itself, not an echo of itself. We are all exhausted by the anger and division the election, the pandemic and months of social unrest have brought us, but many people don't know how to deal with that exhaustion, anger and frustration. Friends, this is the perfect opportunity for the church to be the church and show the world a better way. Neuwhof writes, "A generation tired of hate, yet caught in its grip, will only be released from it if there's a clear alternative. Authentic, grace-filled, hope-bearing, truthful people are what our friends and neighbors need."

There are countless we can be those grace-filled, hope-bearing people that our nation, our friends and neighbors need. There are things we can all do individually and as a congregation – individually we can promote grace and hospitality in our conversations and social media posts. We disagree about issues and how to move forward, of course, but may we do so in a way that focuses on loving neighbor (and family and work colleagues). We can perform everyday acts of kindness and grace. There are ways that we can be grace-filled, hope-bearing people as a congregation too. Let's contribute generously toward helping our neighbors with Thanksgiving

baskets and underprivileged children with Christmas gifts. Let's welcome all and let our community know that they are welcome to become a part of this loving family of faith.

If we do these things and the others that Jesus commanded - we don't have to be anxiously watching for the return of the bridegroom. We can take a nap without worry - everyone needs Sabbath after all – knowing that the way that we live our lives keeps us ready. May it be so for all of us. May we all live in such a way that we are indeed counted among the wise.

ⁱ The New Interpreter's Bible, "Matthew," p. 450 and Feasting on the Gospels, pp 254 ff.