

“Assuming Responsibility Through the Physical”

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul Minnesota

Matthew 25:1–13
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The Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

At first glance, this parable makes me cringe. It's trying to make a point and I'm not sure what the point is, to be honest. The kingdom of heaven will be like this, there are ten bridesmaids and five are wise and five are foolish? What kind of kingdom is that, where half of the people in it are foolish? I am expecting more from the kingdom of heaven.

And then, of course, as it unfolds, the foolish, the unprepared who had gone off to buy oil because they hadn't planned ahead and didn't bring enough, are missing when the bridegroom finally makes his appearance. But by then it's too late. The door to the banquet is now closed and locked. And when the foolish bridesmaids pound on the door, asking to be let in, the bridegroom says, "I do not know you."

It's so harsh, so final. So not the way I like to picture the kingdom of heaven. Where's the grace here? Where is the unconditional love in this parable?

Well, let's try to understand what this text is all about. And first of all, this text is not aimed at people outside the faith, it is very much directed toward the faithful—those who profess loyalty to Jesus. It also is helpful to understand the context of this parable in Matthew 25.

According to Matthew, as soon as Jesus finished telling this parable, he launched into another one about a landowner, who trusted his property to his workers by giving them each some talents of which they are to be good stewards. And you will remember that in that parable, the master is most critical of the worker who was cautious and did nothing with the talents entrusted to him.

That leads directly to the next chapter, Matthew 26, where the Last Supper takes place, followed by Peter's denial of Jesus three times, and his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. So do you understand the progression here? Do you sense the urgency in Jesus' voice as forces are mounting against him, and he can't help wondering who among his closest friends is really with him? What the bridegroom said to those foolish bridesmaids, "I do not know you," becomes simply a foretaste of what Peter will say about Jesus—the one who not long ago called Peter the rock, upon whom he would build a church.

And maybe that's where the grace is, in all of this. It's infused and running through the whole thing, even when people are afraid and weak and acting foolishly. And by the way, who said these parables are about final judgment and are about who's in and who's out anyway? I think instead, they are about how we are to live today. How we are to be alert and faithful today. How we are to be in the game and to be responsible and serious and good stewards of what has been entrusted to us.

Maybe no one ever told those five bridesmaids that it was important that they plan ahead and get their own oil for their lamps. Perhaps no one ever explained to them that everyone has a responsibility to do their part. That in fact, doing nothing simply isn't consistent with being a faithful, loyal disciple. That it's unfair for some to assume that they can simply opt out because others will come along and carry their load for them.

I think this is a great text on stewardship—about what it means to be a good steward. What is expected of us? What does it mean to be prepared? What does it mean to have enough? What does it mean to be responsible? What would it look like for The House of Hope to have a little extra oil in its lamp—a little extra infusion of income in 2018 so we don't have to float from year to year, looking for ways to trim or cut our annual operating budget? That's not an inspiring way to live.

You either have or will be receiving soon a letter and a pledge card asking you to consider your financial commitment to the ongoing work of this church. The work we do is important. Our operating budget is a lean one, without much room to cut without eliminating staff or reducing our vital mission outreach giving that directly helps the poor in our community.

Yes, we have an endowment, but much of that is designated toward specific programs such as music, The Houses of Hope Fund, and the Sunday Series. To assume that this church's endowment is a pot of cash into which we can dip our fingers anytime there is a need, without each one of us having to dig deep into our own pockets to help cover that need, is to assume we can borrow someone else's oil any time we want. It's not taking responsibility for the running of this church, which cannot exist without the strong financial support of everyone.

Next Sunday is Commitment Sunday, and we will celebrate the many ways in which this church fills our own lamps with oil. For the spiritual nurture it provides us, for the sense of place and belonging in an otherwise lonely world; for the ways it helps us connect our faith to events in the world and in our lives; for the ways it inspires us in worship and helps us transcend the here and now; and for the ways it challenges us while at the same time assures us that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Next Sunday we will have an opportunity to present our pledge cards and declare our financial support of the church. We will have an opportunity to say thank you to God, for the blessings that are ours, and to return to God a portion of that which already belongs to God.

It's simply what good and faithful stewards and followers of Jesus Christ do. Thanks be to God.

Amen.