

Matthew 25:1-13
The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids
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Welcome, especially to those of you who are visitors this morning. What we have been doing each week this fall is looking together at the stories that Jesus told, because with his words he paints a picture of what God is like. These word pictures are called parables, and each one depicts a vivid image spoken by Jesus. We believe that more than any other person, Jesus was able to give us these images, because he himself was so intimately familiar with the Father. In fact, the Bible says that Jesus was one with the God the Father.

These parables are important for a few reasons: 1. They help reshape our image of who God is; 2. They have the ability to change the way we behave. They can change our thinking and our actions.

Is there anyone in this room right now who is themselves, or know someone who is a procrastinator? If you are a true procrastinator you might be thinking to yourself, "I'll raise my hand later."

When I was a freshman at Saint Olaf College all the way back in the 1999, I had, in my first semester, a class in Micro-Economics. It met at 5am. It actually met at 9, but it might as well have been 5. On the first day of class my professor, Rebecca Judge, who was also my advisor, said that there were only three exams in the class and that was it. The rest was reading and lecture notes, which some, including your pastor, took to mean that if I could master the material from the text for each exam, attendance at class was not required. Some took more liberty with this than I did, but the truth is, I skipped quite a bit. Then when it came time for the first exam, I spent a whole 4 hours the night before studying the chapters which it covered. The following day I came to the exam refreshed and well rested, after my robust 4-hour study session (I hope you pick up on my sarcasm), sat down at the table and answered the first question no problem. The problem was, there were five pages after the first, of which I knew none.

Do you know what happened to me on that test? And no, this is not a story of grace. I failed it. I failed it bad. And here's why I failed it: by the time I was ready to become a serious student, it was too late. When I signed up for the class, what I was saying with my signature was that I was willing to do what a micro-economics student would do along the way. But with my actions, I was saying something entirely different. And when it came time for test day, it was too late. I had put it off too long.

Now the story we're going to look at today is one that illustrates the fact that people who have decided to follow Jesus also choose to put off real discipleship until another day. And this parable paints a picture of what it is like for those who, with their actions, decide to commit to following Jesus, and those who put it off until later. And whether it is real discipleship in following Jesus or some other part of our lives, I would guess that every one of us here has some area of our lives in which God is inviting us to action, and we say, tomorrow...or if you're a dedicated procrastinator, the day after tomorrow.

This text from Matthew's gospel depicts a number of scenes that address the end, when followers of Jesus will stand before God. Now to be clear, these are disciples, not people who have never heard of Jesus, but those who have decided to follow him, but then at the end choose not to follow.

So if you would, out of reverence and honor for God's word, I want to invite you to stand with me as I read from Matthew's gospel chapter 25, beginning at verse 1. Listen carefully, we're reading God's Holy Word.

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

This is a picture of a wedding scene. There are bridesmaids and a bridegroom, there are lamps and there are oil. Five are prepared and Jesus calls them wise, and five do not have enough oil and Jesus calls them foolish. This is a picture of a first century wedding, and it's helpful for us to understand what would take place at one of these ceremonies. Weeks in advance, invitations would go out and there would be those who are invited to be bridesmaids. This invitation was extended, and along with it the expectation is expected to perform certain responsibilities (we know what this is like). In this story, 10 are invited and 5 are well prepared and 5 are not.

In Middle Eastern weddings, the ceremony would be set at the bridegroom's home. Preparations would be made, food and drink prepared, then at dusk, when it was cool, the bridegroom would leave the guests and the bridesmaids and travel across town to retrieve the bride. Now, they don't come immediately back to the home, they take the longest route possible back to the party, because they want to go through the village and invite others to join them for the celebration.

Now the gathered party would never be quite sure when the bridegroom would return, but most weddings, the arrival of the bride and groom would be after dark, after they had traveled around the village inviting others. Then, when the bridegroom arrived, was when the bridesmaids' job kicked in. You see, it was dark and they were expected to have lamps to provide light for the festivities, and they also go out in the streets, to guide the party home.

In Jesus' story, 5 of the bridesmaids brought extra oil and 5 did not. And if you put the text aside for a moment, what we see here are two different types of disciples. Both have accepted the call to be a bridesmaid (a disciple), but only one has actually done what a disciple is supposed to do. In Matthew, Jesus tells his followers many stories of these two types of disciples. Let me give

you some examples: house on the rock, house on the sand; wide road, narrow path; weeds planted next to wheat. And he does this to illustrate the fact that right now the two options may look exactly the same. The house on the sand may look just like the house on the rock. But there will come a day when the wind and the waves will crash and only one of those houses will remain standing.

It's the same with these bridesmaids. You can't tell which of them has oil and which does not. Until the party returns. Verse 5 picks up saying: **As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.'** Now understand this, this passage is not saying that it is bad that the party slept. Sometimes it would take a really long time for the bride and groom to return, the celebration would go on as preparations were made, and sometimes the guests needed a rest. But then as the party is returning to the home, they say, "Look, here they come. Trim your lamps and get ready for the bridegroom's return." And to that, 5 of the bridesmaids say. "Give me some of your oil because I was not prepared and do not have enough."

And this is one of the points I want to draw out of the text for us: you cannot borrow someone else's discipleship. You cannot borrow someone else's oil. Walking with Jesus is non-transferrable. Nobody can live your life of faith, nobody can have a relationship with him for you, no one can walk with Jesus for you—only you can do it.

The practical question in this passage is this: what is this oil and where can I get it? I want to suggest that there are 5 practical ways that you can fill your lamp so that you can be ready.

1. Hear the voice of the shepherd in the scripture.
2. Develop a real relationship with him in prayer.
3. Worship – not just come to worship on Sunday, practice worshipping God anywhere and everywhere you can, at work, at home doing chores, doing everyday leisure activities.
4. Develop Christian friendships. Choose to invest time in growing these friendships.
5. Serve others together.

These are things that will help you to fill up your lamp so that at the end of the semester you are not trying to cram everything you can learn about micro-economics into your brain. It's not meant to be lived that way, and here's where the metaphor breaks down: no matter how much micro-econ you learn, it's always going to be lame. Now it's true: with growing in grace and in following Jesus, the more you invest into it, the exponentially more it will a reward to you.

I want to tell you about something that I hope very much that this church will choose to invest in. Kids Hope is a beautiful program. Kids Hope is a mentoring program in which a church like ours, partners with a school, like, say, OJ Neighbors. What happens then is that people like you and me, people who have experienced and are living out their hope and love for Jesus choose to invest 1 hour a week for one year with one student (the hope though is that it is so rewarding that you will invest 2,3,4 years into the life of this child). What happens as you speak to this boy or

girl words of promise, hope, love, that there is a bridegroom who is preparing a banquet even for them and that you want them to be a part of the wedding feast. The remarkable thing that happens in that relationship is that not only does the child grow in confidence and their sense of purpose in this world, but you yourself have your oil filled to overflowing.

At this very moment, there is a principal and school superintendent begging, and I'm not exaggerating—if Jason were here, I think he'd be nodding his head—begging for a church like ours to accept this invitation to be a faithful bridesmaid. What an incredible opportunity for us to fill not only your own lamps, but help others know how they can, as well.

Being a disciple is nothing like micro-econ. Being a disciple is the best, there is so much life and vigor there. But someone else can't do it for you, only you can be a disciple of Jesus.

The other thing Jesus says about those who choose not come prepared to the wedding feast is that it is possible for us to be too late. Listen to Jesus' words: **And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.**

Jesus paints an image of a time in the life of a disciple – notice he's only talking about people who know the bridegroom – that it is possible that there would be a moment when it is too late. Now this may sound harsh, and if you're like me, you want to look for those other passages that say to us, like that in the OT book of Lamentations, that God's mercies are from everlasting to everlasting, they're new every morning, that God's mercies go all the way up to the heavens and all the way down to the bottom of the seas, that they are never ending. And yet it looks here like it has an end. What do we do with this? One option is to simply pick the interpretation we like and go with that one and ignore the other—we're not going to do that here.

The other is to do very careful exegetical gymnastics to interpret our way out of the thing we don't want to hear. We're not going to do that either. What we're going to do is what I think Jesus wants us to do, and that is to stand in the tension between. In each moment, let's remain in the tension and let the text, let the painting, speak to us in the moment in which we are living. What does Jesus want to do with the scene he's painting in my life now?

And if we look together at this, I think the answer is pretty plain. What Jesus wants for you and for me is for us to wake up, stop putting off the things we want us to do, and follow him with our lives individually and together as a community. Jesus wants to arouse us from our slumber and stop pretending, stop putting off 'til tomorrow what needs done today, to stop procrastinating our discipleship and join him today.