

**November 12, 2023 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**Amos 5:18-23, Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16**  
**Matthew 25:1-13**

[Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus, posted on Nov. 1, 2020, The Story of the Bridesmaids!; My own sermon from 11-8-20]

**Grace and peace, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.**

**Friday evening I had the joy (and I mean that seriously) of being** part of a youth lock-in here at church.

Some of Hope's youth and a bunch of their friends spent the night, young adults took leadership.

There were games of a hide-and-seek-esque favorite called Sardines,

a campfire in the courtyard,

prayer shawl making,

some big conversations around the candles and map in the chapel,

midnight tacos (a little earlier than midnight),

movie watching,

lots of running around.

Did they sleep? That is the question many of you are wondering. And on the heels of it, did I sleep?!

I can affirm that we all got some hours of sleep, and I can affirm it was limited!

In this spirit, I've been chuckling about today's gospel... Did you hear that? Keep awake!

"Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

**Today's is the first of three parables where Jesus is talking privately with his disciples**

about the signs of the end of the age.

In the midst of turmoil, just days from the cross and his own death,

he describes the reign of heaven,

and the necessity of being aware and prepared for what is coming.

This message is as much for Matthew's own community, as it is for Jesus' disciples

Matthew's community must have been tired, exhausted, in fact.

Generations have risen and fallen, the temple is gone, the community is scattered, what should they do?

"Keep awake" we hear in this first parable.

**It's tempting in these parables** to jump to conclusions, to draw the lines:

this character must be so and so, and this one must be God.

More and more we're learning that such tidy lines might not be the best read or the intent.

Rather than clear answers, maybe the job of a parable is to call us into deeper reflection.

**Today's parable of the waiting bridesmaids does just this.**

Why don't those supposedly wise bridesmaids just share what they've got instead of being so stingy?

Why are the doors so quickly shut tight? And who is doing the shutting?

Where is that bridegroom? And why does he arrive so late?

**The classic interpretation of this parable**, warns us to stay awake,  
to be ready, alert, to be like the wise bridesmaid, supplies in hand.

But did you notice that in the parable they *all* fall asleep?

The so-called-wise, and the so-called-foolish?

...Drowsy, every one of them falling asleep during the wait.

So if they all fall asleep, what then distinguishes the wise from the foolish?

**Maybe their big mistake for the so-called-foolish is that they leave:**

that they get all stressed about oil (do they have enough?),

when it's really their presence that the bridegroom desires.

They miss the celebration, the groom misses them, the community isn't whole.

Debie Thomas confesses: "I totally *get* the 'foolish' bridesmaids..."

She continues, "I get how hard it is to stick around when my 'light' is fading and my reserves are low.

I get what it's like to scramble for perfection,

to insist on having my ducks in a row before I show up in front of God, or the church, or the world."

Then she goes on, "Only a bridesmaid who trusts in the groom's ... unconditional compassion,

only a bridesmaid who knows that the groom has light and oil to spare,

only a bridesmaid who understands that her presence — messy and imperfect though it might be —

is of intrinsic value to the groom, will find the .... courage to stay."

The posture for waiting, then, is one of courage, even when we're stressing or feeling inadequate.

Show up: show up in all your complicated messiness,

for as Debie Thomas writes, "the groom delights in you—not in your lamp."

**Or maybe their mistake is one of trusting scarcity, of hoarding, of individualism.**

Here it's not the so-called-foolish making the mistake, but the so-called-wise who refuse to share.

What would have happened if they shared their oil?

Or what would have happened if they just stood together and shared their light?

It's tempting, isn't it, to get pointy, judge-y, to worship our rightness,

rather than sharing our abundance, an abundance that really was never ours in the first place.

**I went to a session this week called Beyond Scarcity.**

Now to be candid, I almost didn't go.

I'd signed up, put it on my calendar, planned around it, but then the day was busy, a little overwhelming, and the lists were long and time was feeling scarce!

The Beyond Scarcity session included a panel of five BIPOC pastors in the Twin Cities reflecting on how scarcity traps us in isolation, how scarcity limits imagination and curiosity.

And how empathy and compassion, collaboration and hospitality, can be the counter balance.

In getting in touch with my own sense of scarcity, and the trap that this is,

I could better hear our need (my need) for relationship.

Each of these leaders leaned into the assets of people in their community, the strengths, the gifts. Economically, emotionally, relationally, maybe scarcity is a lie.

There is actually enough, there is plenty, there's an abundance...if we dare together to live into it

And we are, we're called to live counter to this scarcity.

This rings true for my experience personally,

and true to what I'm experiencing here at Hope in recent years:

it can feel risky to let go of the narratives of scarcity, to live into the abundance,

but we can, and, in fact, I believe that's part of our call as a community.

Dear ones, today we receive and bless our Gratitude and Generosity commitments for the coming year and we hear another testimony.

The reign of God in today's readings is meant to be a way of life, not a judgement, not a threat, but a way of living.

Justice rolls down like waters, grace overflows,

And together we are alert for what God is doing with us and around us.

I've been watching for this through the last week.

**I was thinking of last Sunday's moving service for All Saints—**

the abundance of music, the care taken by the altar guild, the blessings of our saints.

Then the Holy Land conversation,

not for answers, but for the chance to hold the complexity, to add our voices, our tears.

That's a complexity I also feel with the Racial Justice ACTION Team –

we're un-learning and re-learning, gaining sensitivity, walking together.

**On Monday, I visited with Hope member Winnie N.**

Winnie reminded me that though we can't see her, she sees us each Sunday  
when she and many others worship online – our tech leaders make this happen.  
On her coffee table, Winnie had a vase of fresh cut flowers brought by her daughter.  
Some of you remember the Easter Flowers, and the way the Friendly Visitors deliver them.  
Winnie explained how the yellow mums are actually last year's Easter Flowers,  
planted in the garden and the blessing continues.

**On Tuesday, a U student who lives nearby came to talk.**

She reflected that our banners and presence in the neighborhood  
remind her that there is more to Christianity than the narrow view she knew growing up.

**When a building issue arose on Wednesday,** I texted a few facilities people for help.

Literally within minutes this cracker jack team had found the help we needed  
and had come to meet the repair person.

**Friday's youth lock-in was great,** and it was made richer by the presence of the Crafters  
and the bread ministry folks, doing their things,  
and yet crossing paths, interacting, taking an interest, adults and youth, modeling faithful community.

**Beloved ones, I could tell you more, but for today, simply hear my gratitude, our gratitude**

for the ways we together share time and gifts, wealth and faithfulness.

We do all this together,

trusting Jesus' grace that overflows,

the justice that rolls down like waters,

keeping awake and sharing the light that we have,

envisioning a world that is more just, more abundant, more open, more beautiful,

...and doing what we can to make it so. Amen.