

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
November 12, 2017
Matthew 25:1-13
Remembrance Day

The passage we just heard from Matthew is from the last group of Jesus' teachings in this gospel as he heads to Jerusalem - to his trial and death.

Some scholars suggest that this passage is very important, because a condemned man, a person who is looking death in the face, would want to impart his most important message.

So we want to listen especially closely to this teaching.

It's as though we're sitting in an audience watching a play unfold. Weddings took place at night in Jesus' day. So we can see the bridesmaids in the flickering light of oil lamps freshly washed and dressed in their finest, waiting around for the wedding banquet to begin. At first they are standing, excited, chatting and laughing - imagining the festivities ahead. But the bridegroom doesn't arrive at the appointed hour. So they wait. And wait. The excitement dies down, they sit down in groups of 2s and 3s, they chat more quietly, time stretches out, some become drowsy, and one by one, the women fall asleep.

And suddenly at midnight there is a "shout" - the bridegroom and his party are approaching. The moment they had been waiting for has finally arrived. The celebrations are to begin. The bridesmaids sit up in the dark and quickly light their lamps, adjust their clothing and smooth down their hair. And head out. But some of the bridesmaids

have used up most of the oil in their lamps and have none in reserve. Their lamps begin to go out. They panic. To be invited to be a bridesmaid is such an honour; and now they are unable to fulfil their role. In desperation, they turn to their sisters, to their friends - "Give me some oil!"

But now the drama changes. Imagine it's you up on stage. You are one of the wise bridesmaids. You have extra oil. You are prepared. And a woman is pulling on your arm and saying, "Please, please, I'll pay you back – just give me some of your oil so I can go out and light the way for the procession to the banquet hall."

What would your impulse be? I know I would extend my flask of oil and say, "No problem, here's some;" to be a good friend, to be liked, to avoid conflict.

But those are not the lines from this parable. I don't get to say or do that. The script says - The wise bridesmaids said, "No!! there will not be enough for you and for us." And they tell the unprepared women in the party to go and purchase more oil.

The 5 foolish bridesmaids hurry off to buy more oil and we see the magnificent procession and hear the singing as the people walk to the banquet hall. When the 5 unprepared bridesmaids return, procession is already over and the door of the banquet hall is shut. Out of breath, they knock and ask to be let in. The Lord answers the door, looks at the carefully and says, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you" and shuts the door. Again, imagine you are one of the women standing there. How do you feel when the door is closed in your face?

So this is a troubling passage.

But it's not the only disturbing passage we've heard recently. It's similar to the one we heard a couple of weeks ago where the people are invited to a royal wedding feast. They refuse to come. Some go about their own business as if a royal wedding were something to sniff at and ignore. Others act bizarrely, murdering the person delivering the wedding invitation. And when the king decides to extend his invitation to everyone, not just those with status, one of the guests who comes, is thrown out because he hasn't dressed, or prepared, properly.

And that passage ended with the words that are equally unsettling: "Many are called, few will be chosen."

So what are we to make of these stories that show us a picture of the kingdom that seems to be exclusive, where people are punished not for being wrong but for not be prepared? Is there no second, or third, or fourth chance?

There are several points to ponder here.

Firstly, what does it mean to be prepared?

Secondly, why would you not share with another?

And lastly, what does it mean for the door to shut?

So first point. What does it mean to be prepared? A story – Our eldest son, Isaac, is an artist. He supports himself as a tattoo artist. And one of the requirements of being a tattoo artist is to be a first responder. Just a few weeks ago, Isaac and a friend came across a couple in an alley downtown Victoria. The man was panicked. The woman with him had overdosed. Isaac jumped into action. Not knowing what drug she had taken, he wasn't willing to do mouth to

mouth himself, so he coached the man through it. When the paramedics arrived, they injected the woman with *naloxone* and she revived. Isaac was told he had saved the young woman's life.

Isaac had been prepared. At the time of his training, he didn't know what for. But years later, he was able to save someone's life.

An amazing story, no?

Let's go back to the point in our parable today where the wise bridesmaids refuse to share their oil with their friends who have run out. If the oil is a metaphor for something else, like wisdom, love of life, relationship with God, good works, these are things that we cannot develop for others. As much as we may want to, especially I think as parents, we *cannot* do another person's work for them. Others have to want these things, work on them, and express them in their own unique way. Ultimately we are responsible for our own choices. We can journey *with* people, encourage them, support them, but ultimately it is an individual personal decision how to respond to life and to God.

But back to the story about my son and the woman he helped save. Because there's more to it. Later that same evening, Isaac and his friend were returning to where he had parked his car and they saw the same woman, now in the company of several others, shooting up. Isaac's friend lost it. He shouted at her, "You almost died, and we saved you! What the hell are you doing?" And the woman replied with words I can't repeat here. Isaac's friend was absolutely distraught. So was Isaac, but he was glad he had saved her. It wasn't up to him what

happened next. But they both wondered - how could someone not value their own life?

And our last point to ponder. A door being shut. Every day doors are shut. Some of our own choosing; others not. Usually these are not big events. But sometimes they are. Sometimes there are life-altering door shuttings. I think of my parents who fought on the underground in Holland during WWII. They made a choice to fight for democracy and for the people who were being persecuted by the Nazis. Not only the Jews, but anyone who was vulnerable or different. The kind of people we hear Jesus talking about all the time. While they were active, it was an exciting time; scary but exciting and very rewarding. But then they were caught. And the prison door shut. And their lives were changed forever as they both suffered terribly until the end of the war and liberation. Still, they always said they would do it over again. It was the only choice to make.

But when *God* shuts the door in our face, what then?

Christianity is a unique religion. We have a personal God. Jesus came to show just how much God loves us. And how to enter more fully into life with God. We have free will. We have decisions to make between right and wrong, life and death, blessing and curse. All through our gospel we are encouraged to choose God and walk the path of compassion, love, forgiveness and life. But that path is a finite one. Time is limited here on earth. And perhaps Jesus is driving home the point – don't put off what you need to do. Because this parable ends with the words, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." He wants to wake us up to the need to be

prepared. We need to do today what needs to be done, because we never know when we'll be called upon to act, or be called upon at the end of our lives.

We make decisions every day that prepare our hearts for God and open us up to life. We make decisions every day to pursue our own interests, or to develop our relationship with God. We go about our own business from the crack of dawn until we fall exhausted into bed at night, or we choose to sit at the feet of Jesus, listening and learning for maybe an hour, or even a few minutes, every day. Every choice we make brings the kingdom of heaven either closer, or pushes it away.

A small example, I think of the times when I don't speak up when someone makes a derogatory remark about someone who is different from them. I know I've been cowardly and let an opportunity to speak up against words that aim to make people into enemies, words that provoke hatred instead of building understanding and compassion. Every time I remain silent, I feel the door shutting in my life and I am miserable. Peace is created day by day by our choices and actions. And God knows we need peace. It takes practice, perseverance and patience. And the grace of God, of course.

We all know what it's like to arrive too late. To not be prepared. And today Jesus is telling us, there are consequences. That we will have regrets. But every day we have the opportunity to start over again. To choose the path that diverges. The one filled by grace freely

given. To be a Christian means be willing to receive this grace, and to take up your cross, willingly, consciously, lovingly.

And to everyday, fill your lamp of light with good works, hospitality and care for others. So that others might see your light shine and desire the love that shines through you. And God willing, they be moved to value their own life and move in the direction of love.

So, the real question is – are we nurturing this good news? When we receive God’s love, it changes us, and when we allow it to change us, our hearts are opened so that we, in turn, will share the good news, the love we have. Our lives are finite. We do have a clock ticking. So what choices will you make today? To fill your lamp, to say and do the things that need to be said and done? To be ready and waiting, ready to do what God asks of you? The party celebrating God’s loving commitment to us is ready to start. Are we prepared? Will we be known when we arrive?

The meal will soon be set on the table. Come and receive the love of God at the altar this morning. And let it change your hearts. May it prepare you for the feast. And let there be peace on earth.
Amen.