

### **Wise or Foolish                      Matthew 25:1 - 13**

In today's gospel we hear a parable about a group of 10 Bridesmaids or Virgins depending on what translation you read. Scholars are a bit unsure about both the original teller of this parable and exactly what the subtleties of the parable are about. Some scholars say it is a parable of Jesus, but others see it more as a Matthean parable constructed after the church was already a separate entity. We will not solve that debate today.

Nor will we be able to shed light on the exact wedding protocol that is the set-up for this parable. The wedding practices of this ancient time are not fully understood. We notice, for example, that there is no bride mentioned. Some wonder if the 10 are bride prospects, that the man is going to marry, but hasn't decided which person to marry. This may sound strange to us but remember in ancient times and still today, there are weddings where the bride and groom know very little about each other. This possible scenario makes understandable the 5 Wise ones being unwilling to share their oil with the foolish, as it immediately greatly increases their chances of being picked. Who knows, perhaps the groom coming late is the first test the potential wives must pass, but all this is conjecture. We cannot know for sure what exactly is going on there.

We do know that this parable is set in a series of parables about the coming Realm of heaven and it is instructive on how to be a faithful member of that realm. The series includes the thief in the night, the good and the wicked servants and the parable of the talents. All of them are really about being prepared to account for your service at any time from a stewardship perspective. These parables assume that the people are already a part of God's realm. The 10 Bridesmaids are invited to the party already. The servants in the other parables are already serving the Master or God. So these are not parables about the grace of God, but about the next step, they show us what we need to do to be faithful servants of God.

All of the parables suggest that serving God is a long, long process, and we should never assume that we are ready and have all we need. As one commentator

suggested, the life of faith is quite unpredictable, we never know what God might ask of us. And we need to move beyond the comfort of saying we have our faith and God is going to take care of us. There is truth in that statement, but these parables tell us that is not the whole story. The life of faith is not a magic ticket one-time event for later on entrance to God's Magic Kingdom when we die. The Realm of God is a living reality. It is only here in the present that we human's meet God, and it is the only place the realm of God can be experienced when we are alive. The Realm of God is not one thing. Theologians talk about it being present now among us, but not fully present. That we catch glimpses of it now when we live into its truth.

We at Faith UCC lived a while on the edge. There was a possibility of the Church closing. Now today, Thanks be to God, we no longer look over the edge, but that does not mean that we have arrived. In some ways we are now at the beginning again. Like the Phoenix we have risen from what we were before. But now we must fly. We were saved by God's grace and so much hard work by so many, but our question now is for what purpose. I think the Foolish Bridesmaids in our parable today were the ones that thought they had arrived. That they were invited, but they did not prepare for the long haul. They did not remember that life is full of delays and change. We must be like the Wise Bridesmaids as we prepare ourselves for service to God. And we know that often that is not an easy road.

It is time for us as a congregation and as individuals to take the next step. To prepare ourselves spiritually and financially to share the Light of Christ in Bradenton. John Carmack, video game innovator says "Focused hard work is the real key to success. Keep your eyes on the goal, and just keep taking the next step toward completing it." That is what we are called to do as well.

We don't have to do it all at once, but we have to do it. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr once said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase. Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Every step towards the

goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals”

Christian writer Anne Lamott has a lot of insight into the nitty gritty of the walk of Faith. In her book, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, she shares an insight that greatly helped her as a writer from E.L. Doctorow, the Writer of Ragtime and other works of historical fiction “who once said that 'Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.' You don't have to see where you're going, you don't have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you. This is right up there with the best advice on writing, or life, I have ever heard.”

In another Anne Lamott’s book, *Travelling Mercies*, she describes how her pastor, Veronica, gave a wonderful illustration of “how she gets direction from God in prayer; she said that when she prays for direction, one spot of illumination always appears just beyond her feet, a circle of light into which she can step. She moved away from the pulpit to demonstrate, stepping forward shyly – this big-boned African-American woman tramping like Charlie Chaplin into an imagined spotlight, and then, after standing there looking puzzled , she moved another step forward to where the light had gone, two feet ahead of where she had been standing, and then again. “We in our faith work,” she said, “stumble along toward where we think we’re supposed to go, stumbling along, and here is what’s so amazing – we end up getting exactly where we’re supposed to be.

We cannot see what is ahead for us. But we know that God will guide and strengthen us if we prepare ourselves. The path of faith in this culture is not easy, because we believe in God’s radical love for all people. But if we move forward together we can make a difference. We must be wise, and invest our time and talent and treasures sacrificially if we are to be faithful servants of God. Nothing else matters in this life. AMEN