

Matthew 25:1-13

²⁵Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But 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.’ ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Loving God, send your Spirit to move in our world and stir the water of our souls that we may desire a word of instruction that awakens us to the joy of your unfolding reign. Amen.

The parable of the 10 bridesmaids, or 10 virgins – depending on the translation – is set in the context of Holy Week. Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem where Jesus spent his days in the temple teaching. Jesus knew his time was limited, so his teaching about the kingdom of heaven had an air of urgency about it. Here is a bit of the sweep of Jesus teaching:

In the previous chapter Matthew recounted Jesus teaching about the Son of Man “coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.” He described a grand gathering of the elect, “from one end of heaven to the other.”

Next Matthew recorded a teaching on the necessity of watchfulness using Noah as an example: “For as in the days of Noah they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage.” They were a self-centered people doing whatever they pleased. Then the rains came and they were all swept away. Jesus concluded that this is how it will be with the coming of the Son of Man, therefore *be ready*.

The case for being watchful and ready builds with the parable of the unfaithful slave who was put in charge when his master went away. With his new found authority the slave took advantage of his fellow slaves with no thought to his master’s return. When the master did

return he caught this slave red-handed in his shenanigans. His fate was described with weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Our reading today continues the theme of watchfulness. The groom has gone to get his bride. (Let’s recall that Jesus is often referred to as the bridegroom.) Is this parable referring to the coming of the Son of Man? And a wedding feast is often a symbol for the kingdom of heaven. Thus our parable could be seen as the drama of the consummation; a celebration of the fulfillment of God’s reign.

Ten young girls form the welcoming party for the bride and groom when they come. *Young girls* is a literal translation of the Greek, so *bridesmaids* and *virgins* are understandable translations.

There is a delay, the girls fall asleep. This detail seems to conflict with the gospel’s focus on watchfulness. And yet they are all awakened at midnight when a shout announces that the bridal couple is on their way.

The girls got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones saw that their lamps were going out, but they would not be allowed to put the others – who brought extra oil – in jeopardy. Perhaps it would have been better for them to enter, humbled, without their lights, rather than being among the missing at the moment the doors to the banquet were opened.

The theme of readiness will continue over the next two Sundays in readings that illustrate how faithful watchfulness leads to kingdom life. And in Matthew, that will bring Jesus’ teaching to an end. The plot to take his life follows immediately in the next chapter.

It was late first century when Matthew was writing, and the expectation of Jesus imminent return was being questioned, thus we can see why Matthew was urging the faithful to remain ever ready and watchful. And yet, 4 times Matthew remembers Jesus saying that the kingdom *has come near, or has come to you*. It’s now about 2000 years later, how do we, today, understand the promise of Jesus’ return?

Comparing Luke's gospel on the subject of the kingdom coming we can read this: *Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed;'²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you'* (Luke 17:20-21).

This is what I believe: the kingdom of heaven includes all time; we live in God's kingdom which has no end. The earth we live on is just a tiny piece of God's creation, and while that makes us a speck within the totality of God's realm, even the hairs on our heads are numbered. We are so small within the big picture of eternity, yet God holds each of us precious.

As we think about our parable of the bridesmaids with their lamps, light is a major symbol. Five bridesmaids made sure their light would not go out. I believe the call of this parable, the call to be ready, has to do with keeping our own light shining. Our light, of course, is not an oil lamp, rather it is our hearts filled with love. Love is the oil of our heart-lights. It is important that we keep our heart-lights shining, for by doing so we manifest the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Our heart-light is the presence of God in us that wants to be shared with the world. When we can feel and acknowledge the love of God in us, it makes our eyes shine in a special way; I see this especially in 93 year old brother John at the Priory in Weston; his eyes seem to sparkle.

I've talked about using our breath as a prayer, imagining it going out from us invisibly, swirling and enfolding others in an embrace of God's Spirit.

If we can pray with our breath, surely we can pray with our eyes; imagining our eyes softly radiating the love of God. Of course, this form of prayer requires us to make eye contact with others, and that might be difficult for some. Yet I believe it is worth the effort to try it. The truth is, eye contact is powerful; it seems to connect us with others on a deeper, even more intimate level. Eyes can be very expressive.

The goal of this prayer of the eyes is simply to communicate God's love. With this prayer we imagine the energy of God's love flowing from our eyes out toward the other. We do it, of course, in secret because this is God's doing and not ours alone. Inside we can silently pray that God would use us as a conduit of God's life-giving love. The imagination, or the consciousness required for this prayer can be described as our *watchfulness*, our *readiness* to be a vessel of God's loving in our world.

So here it is: breath prayers and the prayer of our eyes are simply aids or techniques to remind us of being present and watchful in our world; helping us to be conscious of the reality of God's presence and love.

Being ready and watchful is about being conscious of God's presence. Not everybody gets it! There are those who believe God has left the building. If that's the case, how will they ever find God in their lives again? How will God reach them?

My friends, *we* are God's hands and feet. Jesus has taught us how it all works. As followers of Jesus we are the face of Christ in this world. Our tender eyes can express God's love; I believe God wants to be known – God wants to be experienced – in this world. As followers of Christ we are *it!* Are we ready? Are we prepared? Can we really believe God abides in us? Can we imagine ourselves filled with the oil of God's love?

Our worship is a reminder of the reality of God's presence. It is now time to go forth and simply share this heavenly love. Amen.