

Matthew 25:1-13 *Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning*

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL

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

First off, I really wish Jesus's parable hadn't picked on the bridesmaids. If you've ever been a bridesmaid, you know that it is hard work—planning showers, getting fitted for the dress, finding the right shoes. The day of, it means making sure the bride has plenty of food and water so she won't faint, running all over the church to find that one attendant who is always going missing, checking and reporting back on who's showing up for the service, delivering messages to other members of the party, running interference between various stepparents and exes so there won't be an emotional melt-down.

I don't blame the bridesmaids for being tired. And when the oil starts to run low, frankly, I think Jesus should have told one of the groomsmen to go running to the store. All they've been doing is congregating in the parking lot, drinking beer out of someone's trunk.

But of course, this is a parable, so we're talking metaphorically. The bridesmaids are not about gender, but about the role they play in ushering in the realm of God. It's about preparing the way for God to show up in the world, even when it seems like God is taking forever. And when God does show up, it means shining a light so brightly that everyone can find their way into the

celebration. So if that's what a bridesmaid is in the realm of God, that means that every Christian—every one of us—has the job of bridesmaid, no matter our gender. Guys, I hope you enjoy wearing that ridiculous dress and the killer heels.

So, we're all bridesmaids, but, as the parable makes clear, some bridesmaids work harder than others. They've all *been* there, waiting and waiting and waiting. They're all tired. Tired of waiting for the other shoe to drop. Tired of having to stay prepared for something that is taking so long that the thing they're hoping for seems like it may never happen.

Anyone here ever had that experience? This has been some week, huh?!

The thing is, waiting is hard work. And *hoping* is even harder work. Hoping in the face of a seemingly endless night. But that's what the bridesmaids are called upon to do. And some of them do it. Some of them do it in the face of tremendous odds.

These last few months have been wearing. When will this pandemic end, so that we can gather freely once more with church and family and friends?

These last few years have felt like eons, as cruelty has seemed normalized and blatant lies have gone unchecked. There have been so many times that I've felt the fuel of hope running low and have wondered why I should even bother to go and replenish it.

But then I've thought about those other bridesmaids who've been keeping at it for centuries. In recent years we have seen, over and over, how crucial Black women have been in the ongoing fight against racist systems in this nation. And that's after enduring four hundred years of slavery and oppression in this country, many of those years with no sign of hope. Others of those years, there's been hope that been cruelly snatched away. Yet they keep at it. That's amazing. It's admirable. But is it, in any way, fair? Is it in any way fair that people who have borne the worst brunt of the suffering are also the ones who have to lead the fight against it?

Yet, many white Christians, who are supposed to be their fellow bridesmaids in ushering in a different kind of world—way too many churches, way too many Christians--either deny that

there's any problem, or they actively work to justify maintain the systems of oppression, and claim that God wants it that way. It's like stealing other people's oil and using their lamps to misdirect others to the wrong wedding. A wedding of prejudice and power and oppression and greed that looks more like something out of Game of Thrones than the Peaceable Realm of Christ.

But what Jesus promised is nothing like that. Jesus promised a wedding party where faithful love and truth will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss; and a celebration like that doesn't happen on its own. It takes planning and preparation and endless persistence. It takes work. Yes, the bridesmaids have to wait, but it's not passive waiting; it's hopeful waiting. And, as the Environmental Scientist, David Orr, has said, "Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up."

I am grateful for the way this church has rolled up its sleeves over the years. Think of all this church has endured, and has been willing to learn over the years. That's why I came here to Birmingham, in the first place. For a church like this, with your history, to be doing the kind of work you're doing, refills the oil in my lamp of hope.

And I'm not alone. Think of the Minutes for Stewardship these last few weeks expressing relief and gratitude for finding a church like ours. A church that works for justice, that cares about the environment, that welcomes all people regardless of race or income level, gender identity or anything else.

You're not denying the need for change, and you're not sitting around waiting for someone else to do the work. You have rolled up your sleeves and gotten busy. You are shining your lamps toward a better world, and in doing so, you are renewing the hope of people who gave up on church a long time ago.

Those folks need to see our light shining. And those who have been doing so much work all along? They need to see that they are not alone.

I know that's how I get my hope refueled—by the witness of all the bridesmaids who won't be silent and won't give up, even when things seem hopeless.

When foreign nationals from seven Middle Eastern nations were abruptly banned from entering, those crowds of protesters at the airports were a drop of oil in my lamp.

When it seemed like this nation thought it was just fine to assault women and brag about it, the Women's March and the sudden surge of the Me Too movement were drops of oil in my lamp.

When we learned of the families on the border being herded into deportation centers and separated from one another, those signs that suddenly appeared in front yards saying: "No matter where you're from, we're glad that you're our neighbor" were a drop of oil in my lamp.

When white people Birmingham and Mountain Brook and in cities and small towns all over America came flooding out to proclaim that Black Lives Matter, they were a drop of oil in my lamp.

How much more must those actions have salvaged the souls and renewed the hope of Muslim Americans who have lived in fear since the start of the War on Terror, immigrant families scraping to get by while living under the constant threat of deportation, and African-Americans whose family members once hung from the trees in the same towns where the residents were now chanting, "I can't breathe!"

I know how grateful I am for every drop of hope. How grateful, these last few weeks, to see the courage of Americans risking their lives to stand in line for hours to vote. Grateful to see ballot counters toiling away through the long nights in spite of all the attempts to rush or intimidate them. Grateful that a system that has taken so much abuse can still function. But none of that happened automatically. It's taken the persistence of so many who have rolled up their sleeves to organize and resist and make sure their voices are heard. And there will never be a time when that won't matter.

There will never be a time when we can afford to sit back and let others carry the oil. There will never be a time when the world won't need a church like ours to shine our light.

Friends, it might seem like the wait is forever; but what we've been promised is worth waiting for, and worth working for. I really, really want to dance at that wedding party, and I know you do, too. So let's keep our sleeves rolled up, our lamps trimmed and burning, and our eyes wide open for the bridegroom, whose promise to us and to this world will not fail.