

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury  
Sermon – November 6, 2005  
“The Kingdom of Heaven Will Be Like This ...”

Matthew 25:1-13  
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My piano teacher expects me to practice 30 minutes each day for seven consecutive days. If I wait until the seventh day, and practice seven times thirty minutes or two hundred and ten minutes, it's a disaster. It's just not the same. It's the thirty minutes everyday that pays off, not the marathon at the last minute. I can't fool her. She knows. It's the daily discipline that counts. Even if the music for a given week is difficult, the everyday practice is what allows me to show up at 1:30 on Tuesdays prepared.

This, in a nutshell, is what the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids is all about. All ten are invited to the wedding banquet. Half of them are methodical about their preparations and half are not. Five bridesmaids have come to understand the importance of practicing the music everyday, living out their faith hour to hour, praying constantly, keeping their lamps trimmed and burning. Five other bridesmaids go about their faith as haphazardly as they do their piano practicing; whenever they get around to it, whenever it happens to be convenient, whenever it doesn't require much of them. They leave their lamps untrimmed and empty.

For Matthew, Christianity is an everyday religion. It is a daily discipline. For Matthew, faith is grown over the course of a very long growing season. It is not like the magic bean in the tale of Jack and the Bean Stalk where the bean is tossed out the window, lands in soil, and grows up to full maturity overnight.

As I read through the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, it occurred to me that the oil in the lamps is a metaphor for our Christian faith. Like the oil, our faith is not a commodity that can just be lent to someone else on demand. It's not something we can just run down to the dealers and buy. Our faith is a quality that we carry with us all the time, a quality we nurture in a disciplined way over the course of our whole lives, such that when we need to lean upon it, our faith is accessible and powerful.

Upon a first reading of the parable, the reader is a bit shocked at the refusal of the five prepared bridesmaids to lend even a little of their oil to the five unprepared

bridesmaids. Where's their compassion? It seems hard-hearted and stingy. And that's exactly what it would be if this were a story about oil. But this is a story about faith, about nurturing one's own faith, about growing a faith that is reliable and probably not lendable.

Matthew writes with a real urgency, afraid, perhaps, that church folks will neglect their faith development and thus won't have it as a strength in the face of crisis. Matthew knows that the extinction of the church is always just one generation away. So, it matters to him that faith not become a ho-hum, when I get around to it, sort of deal. If there is a bluntness, an abruptness to this parable, it is because Matthew sees what is at stake.

At the end of the teaching year, I always attend the piano recital my teacher organizes for her younger students. I sit right up in the front row. What I witness is how each student walks to the piano with confidence, announces the title and the composer, sits on the bench, places fingers on the key board, and plays what has been learned by heart. The teacher may need to offer a gentle prompt, but at that point in time, the students are on their own with what they have practiced over and over again. There's no last minute borrowing from what another has accomplished. Our Christian faith is just like that.

When Jesus told a parable, he often began with the words, "The kingdom of heaven will be like this." And then Jesus would offer a marvelously mysterious word picture, a parable to reveal life the way God intends it to be lived. This parable reveals God's great hope that faith will be as familiar to the believer as a rolling pin is to a baker, or a paint brush to an artist, or reins to a horseback rider. God's hope is that our faith, practiced over and over again, would be as an old friend in the time of trouble.

Thomas Lynch, a Congregational minister serving in London, captured the spirit of this theological truth in his hymn, My Faith, It Is an Oaken Staff.

My faith, it is an oaken staff, O let me on it lean.  
My faith provides the ground of hope, supports a purpose keen.  
Your Spirit, God, upon me send, that I may be what you intend.  
With patient courage, we'll contend as radiant saints serene.

When I think of the South Church saints we are honoring today and of all the saints, living and dead, who have touched our lives, I think of so many women and men who have shown me what a difference it makes when faith is regarded as an

everyday tool on the carpenter's workbench. I think of Ruth Drake who was my first grade church school teacher and Bill Witherspoon who taught the fifth grade class, how they both opened up the Bible stories for me as if those stories meant more than any other stories I would ever hear. I think of Rosa Parks and Raymond Berry who taught me what it means to take a risk for freedom's sake. I think of Brenda Pelc-Faszczka and Alice O'Donovan who taught me that faith also has a feminine voice. I think of Bertha Pfau and Ed Swift who taught me something about the blessing of patience. I think of Marc Feldmann and Rebecca Zwerling who taught me about living without fear. I think of so many saints who have crossed my path, women and men whose lamps are always filled with oil, even at the mid-night hour.

I have great memories of watching my grandfather Clemmer stationed at his work bench planing boards, sanding woodwork, hand-drilling holes, hammering nails. He worked with great ease and efficiency. His tools were his friends, extensions of his hands and fingers. When he needed a leather punch, he knew exactly where to reach. When he needed a Phillips head screw driver, he opened the right drawer without batting an eye. His tape measure hung from his belt loop as naturally as an earlobe hangs from an ear. It is such a blessing to be taught by people like that, people who are so practiced in their art that one feels secure in their presence. Likewise, it is such a blessing to be taught by people of faith who just seem to have a vocabulary for prayer, an ease with Scripture, a quiet knowing when it is time to stand up for justice, and a readiness to assume the role of the servant. Matthew invites us, through this parable, to be one of those people whose practiced faith has prepared us for the day of crisis.

As always, I share these reflections with you in the greatest of hope. Amen!