Twenty-Fifth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): "Love Not Legalisms"
Matthew 25:1-13
November 14-15, 2026
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"A parable with teeth" is the header in my study notes about this parable of the ten young women. It's a parable that usually sets my teeth on edge. Does anything seem **wrong** about it to you?? Two things bother me most:

- The response of the 5 "wise" maidens to the 5 "foolish" ones. If we asked in this case, "WWJD?" "What would Jesus do?" do we **really** think He'd refuse to share? Isn't the bedrock Christian belief that our faith instills in us, "When we share, everybody has enough"??
- The second thing that really bothers me is the refusal of the bridegroom to open the door. *The Message* rendering of the story goes like this:

> **11** *"Much later, the other virgins, the silly ones, showed up and knocked on the door, saying, 'Master, we're here. Let us in.'*
>
> **12** *"He answered, 'Do I know you? I don't think I know you.'*

It's chilling, just **chilling**, to think of our Lord saying to me or to **any** of us, *'Do I know you? I don't think I know you.'*

Here are the shorthand responses I found to my concerns. In the first place, we need to understand the flasks of oil as probably representing "deeds of love and mercy."[1] In that case, it's not the maidens' **unwillingness** to share the fruits of their devotion, it's more like their **inability** to do so. Just like I can't transfer my grades to another student, I can't transfer my **actions** to somebody else either. Here's a simple explanation given by William Barclay, the Scottish Bible

interpreter: "… there are certain things that can't be borrowed… A [person] cannot borrow a relationship with God; he [or she] must possess it for him [or her] self."[2] **My** relationship with God isn't going to do **you** any good. You need your own. **Relationship** with our Lord is what it's all about. Not just glancing or intermittent contact, not just superficial friendship, but true intimacy with our Lord Jesus. That's why the wedding imagery is so important. Sometimes we imagine all God's energy invested in keeping a report card on each of us, tracking when we've kept and when we've broken the rules. When we focus solely on God's **rules**, we miss the **relational** piece: our God is longing to be in communion with us. The rules are there to protect and deepen our **relationship** with God and with each other.

As I shared with Bible study friends on Wednesday, I felt a lot better about this parable after I studied it and saw it from a different angle. **Most** encouraging of all is the wedding imagery. What is a more intimate relationship than marriage? The only thing that comes close in Hebrew Scripture is the bond between mother and child. Through the prophet Isaiah (ch. 49) the Lord asks:

> *15 Can a woman forget her nursing child*
> *or show no compassion for the child of her womb?*
> *Even these might forget,*
> *yet I will not forget you.*
> *16 See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands….*

In Jeremiah (3:14) we read:

> *"Return, O faithless children,*
> *says the LORD,*
> *for I am your husband…."*

And in Hosea:

> *19 … I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. 20 I will take you for my wife in faithfulness, and you shall know the LORD.*

Too often we make religion about the rules. But the heart of religion, the heart of our faith, is **relationship**! Our God created us out of love. Our God has redeemed us out of love. Our God sustains and sanctifies us out of love. The heart of our faith is **love**, not **legalisms**!

The intimate marriage imagery is beautifully described in Revelation 19:

> *6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,*
>
> *"Hallelujah!*
> *For the Lord God*
> *the Almighty reigns.*
> *7 Let us rejoice and exult*
> *and give him the glory,*
> *for the marriage of the Lamb has come,*
> *and his bride has made herself ready;*
> *8 to her it has been granted to be clothed*
> *with fine linen, bright and pure"—*
>
> *for the fine linen* [like the lamp oil!] *is the righteous deeds of the saints.*
>
> *9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."*

That will be the invitation to Communion at Gary's memorial service on Monday: *Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."* The Holy Communion we celebrate today and so often is a foretaste of the wedding banquet to come, when God's Kingdom has fully come, when everybody and everything is swept up in the Lordship of our Christ, when He is all in all. In the New Testament the bride of Christ is the Church. But when the Kingdom is fully come, when all God's plans are fulfilled, the Church will cease. The Word and Sacraments, the community of faith which mediate God's Presence to us, will no longer be necessary because we will **be with God**.

In the moment, though, how do we **respond** to God's overwhelming love for us? How do I **return** God's embrace? Jesus says the answer is loving God above everything else and loving my neighbor as myself. If I do that, as the Holy Spirit gives me grace, I **will** be ready, whether He comes to us first in the Second Coming, or whether we go to Him first, when we die.

Last week's parable of the talents, today's parable of the ten young women, and next week's parable of the sheep and the goats, all touch upon the final judgment. Each one says that how we live our lives today, what and whom we devote ourselves to today, what my lived-out priorities are today, govern what happens later. My choices today affect the outcome of my life later. In a very real way, we'll judge ourselves at the end of it all. Don't people who have had "life after life" experiences say that they saw their life pass in front of them as if they were watching a movie, and that they were given a God's eye view of it all? I read that to mean that, in the end, we will really judge ourselves, with an honesty we may never have attained in this life.

'Do I know you? I don't think I know you.'

In Robert Capon's book about the parables of judgment, he points out:

> "He does not say, 'I never called you.' He does not say, 'I never loved you.' He does not say, 'I never drew you to myself.' He only says, 'I never knew you – because you never bothered to know me.'"[3]

How blessed are we that we are given the gift of time, the gift of today, to know and love Him.

Amen

[1]*New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 450.
[2]William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2 (rev. ed., Daily Study Bible series, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 320.
[3]Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 165.

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