Congregational Church of La Jolla UCC
Rev. Tim Seery
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Matthew 25: 1-13

Let us pray,
God of East and West, and Everything In-Between: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

After having been in the pulpit preaching consistently since Labor Day, I was kind of hoping that today the lectionary would give me a bit of a softball. You know, it's about time. But no no. Of course it had to be the Parable of the Ten Virgins. Or, as many more modern translations now call it the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. The reason for that discrepancy is interesting, the Greek word is "*parthenos*" which actually means "virgins." But in the context of the time in first-century Jewish society this would have been the word to refer to any young, unmarried woman or marriageable age. And the thing about this particular parable that is tough is that it reveals to us that allegory has it's limits. There's no perfect allegory. Jesus is trying to teach people, doing it the best way he can in all of the ways he can and so it's important for us to figure out what the main thing is.

Whenever we are presented with a text that might make us a bit itchy, or a bit uncomfortable, there is value in keying in on what that is and to try to interrogate why that might be for us. Those of you who have ever done a book group with me know that one of the things we do is we practice a reading meditation call "lectio divina." Which is the practice of listening to or reading the same text three times consecutively. The first time to just relax and settle into it, to let the words wash over you, to not think about anything too hard. The second time to notice what parts of it you react to, or find peculiar, or beautiful or uncomfortable and the third time to mine down into these things, to ask questions of them, to see what those impulses and reactions might have to teach us about the text and about ourselves. That's all to say this would be a fabulous text in which to practice lectio divina.
So, let's dive right into it. When

What's is it that is going on with this parable? This parable is located toward the end of the book of Matthew. Matthew has 28 chapters, this is in chapter 25. We are getting close to the end of his earthy teaching, right after this we get into the Last Supper and his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. So this section is referred to as the "eschatological discourse" — what does that mean? It means it deals with eschatology, which is that which pertains to the "last things." In other words eschatology is this grand way of talking about the ultimate destiny of humankind and the entire universe. Highly philosophical, highly grandiose, but also when you're Jesus and you've come to redeem the world and everyone and everything in it and offer a way of justice and peace that is beyond anything anyone can comprehend, you can understand why he'd have an interest in this topic.

And so Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives with his disciples, even this location is symbolic because the Hebrew prophet Zechariah foretold a future where the Lord would stand on the Mount of Olives and be recognized as king over all the earth. So even the setting is grandiose and important. And Jesus tells a story. And the story goes like this. Ten bridesmaids are getting ready for the wedding processional. Half of them take extra oil for their lamps, the other half do not. The groom is delayed until midnight, so the bridesmaids get tired and fall asleep. The funny thing is this was a really common occurrence. Grooms were often significantly late. And that was in large part due to all of the last minute negotiations that would have to be happen between the groom and the brides parents before the wedding. Well at midnight the groom shows up, the bridesmaids come to, and half of them don't have any more oil for their lamps. They ask the bridesmaids who were prepared with extra oil if they could have some, and they say no, go get your own oil. And while these five bridesmaids are out buying oil they start the banquet, close the door, and refuse to open it when they return and pretended to not even know them. And the moral of the

story is to be prepared, to keep watch, to not let the oil burn out, to stay ready for the grand eschatological banquet—which by the way wedding banquets in the first century would last for about seven days—so by burning all their oil and not being prepared, they were not present to witness this grand moment for which they waited so diligently. And so Jesus is saying that we never know when that grand arc of justice returns to us, when the values we've fought for unrelentingly will come to fruition, so be ready. Don't miss out.

You know, I really wish we could know how this story would land on first-century years. Was it perceived as serious, or was it comical? I couldn't help but think of this maybe a bit like the ancient version of the 2011 rom-com with Kristin Wiig and Maya Rudolph simply titled, "Bridesmaids." Where Maya Rudolph is the bride, and she asks Kristin Wiig to be her maid of honor but just about everything that could go wrong goes wrong during this long countdown to the wedding, and even among this group of bridesmaids there are some who are very meticulous and prepared, and then Kristin Wigg's character, her chaotic life leading to so much ill-preparation and misfortune. I'll tell you, I hardly ever use AI for anything but I was curious what it would say and so I asked it to give me a textual analysis of the movie Bridesmaids in conversation with the Parable of the 10 Bridesmaids and it did it, it sounded so serious it said, "The parable of the 10 bridesmaids is a parable about spiritual readiness and personal accountability, while the 2011 romantic comedy Bridesmaids can be read as a parable about emotional readiness, and the necessity to take control of one's own life. So there you have it.

I mentioned earlier that allegory has it's limits. And in this case there is something so bad, so rude about the bridesmaids who had extra oil telling the others to go find their own because there wouldn't be enough. Of course we see that and say, "that is scarcity thinking, that is not of Jesus, that is not the way of Jesus." And if that's not bad enough, think about if we did this, we have some sort of a big party here and send people out to go pick up something because we told them they came unprepared, and then when they return we've locked the door and pretend like we've never seen them before. That's so un-Christian. It's awful. And so what we have to keep in mind with this is Jesus is servicing a point and being dramatic about it, using hyperbole, he's not using this as a prescription for how we should behave, he's telling a story to make a very particular point about something. And the reason that needs to be said is because you know there's some right wing politician out there who has probably tired to point to this parable as justification for doing something hideous like denying children free or reduced lunch or health care or something because "they came unprepared." And that's just total hogwash.

So what do we do with this. What is our theological task with this? How does this story speak to us right now?

This is a parable that serves a point about a grand vision Jesus has. A day when the heavenly banquet comes to earth. A day when every tear is wiped away, were we fear nothing, where what humanity has labored for arrives to meet us in the here and now. If you thought last Tuesday felt like that a little bit, Jesus is saying, what you felt then is just a morsel, just the tiniest taste, because what I dream for you, what I imagine for you is *that* multiplied by an order of magnitude that you can't even comprehend. And Jesus says, I want you to be ready. I want you to see it, when it happens. I want you to carry oil in your lamps, I want to you to have a deep spiritual reservoir of fuel, not only so you can make it through the dark nights and the long delays that feel like they last forever, but I want you to have oil in that lamp so that you can see it, and taste it and breathe it when it finally arrives. A justice beyond imagining, a reign of love so profound that no one and nothing in this world can ever lord over us. A world that is so turned up-side down that it defies gravity. A world in which we wont have to accept limits just because someone says they're so. A world where we get to be done playing by the rules of someone else's game, where it's too late to go back to sleep, and no one brings us down. A future that is unlimited, a future where we fly so high, that we defy gravity. A future where everyone deserves the chance to fly and no one brings us down. A future where together, we are unlimited. A future where everyone deserves to fly.

May it be forever so.
Amen.