

22 Pentecost
 November 9, 2014
 Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose
 Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
 Psalm 78:1-7
 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
 Matthew 25:1-13

If some of us here were a bridesmaid in today's Gospel parable, we would have already arranged for an extra 5-gallon can of lamp oil stashed away in the back of the broom closet – you know, just in case. But of course the parable Jesus is telling his disciples has nothing to do with lamp oil. This story is about the people of Christ's church being ready to receive him when he returns to usher in the Kingdom of God.

Leading up to this parable, Jesus had been meeting challenge after challenge by the religious leaders, in the Temple courtyard in Jerusalem. At the end of these confrontations he foretold the destruction of the Temple. "Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown away." (Matt 24:2). Jesus and his disciples went from the Temple to the Mount of Olives, where the disciples asked Jesus, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" As part of his description of the end of the age, Jesus tells this parable of the ten bridesmaids; five of them being wise and ready, five being foolish and not prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom.

The point to the story is for us to be ready and vigilant for Jesus' return, because, as he said in Matthew 24:36, "about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." It seems that Jesus was predicting here that his return could take a while, and they will need to keep their faith and endurance reenergized. The proof of our being vigilant is that we have spare oil, or whatever we need, to keep ourselves ready for him. It is like Janet Thorsrud's work on Emergency Preparedness, but on a spiritual level. Spiritual emergency preparedness. The message of emergency preparedness, and the theme of this parable of the ten bridesmaids is the same: the time is now.

In our Old Testament reading, Joshua had led the Israelites for many years after their arrival in the Promised Land. He was very old; he realized that he was near the end of his leadership, and he called all of the people together for a renewal of their covenant with God. That covenant was made way back at Mount Sinai when Moses received the stone tablets from God which carried the Ten Commandments. Forty years later, when Moses had led the Israelites right up to the banks of the Jordan River, ready to cross into the land God had promised them, Moses called the people together for a renewal of their covenant with God. Now, Joshua knew it was time for another renewal of that same covenant. He knew what life is like; that there are many false gods, all sorts of distractions and alternatives that surround them, and us, in life, and we each need to decide whether we worship those powers, or if we defiantly choose the One True God. Joshua pushed the point to make clear that this is not a choice to put off: the time is now.

The theme of our stewardship drive this Fall is ‘Walking the Way’ with Christ. Walking the Way includes checking the course we are on, to be sure we are staying on the path. If you are like me, I prefer to put off things that I know will be difficult, or if they will take time I think I don’t have. Sometimes my email inbox gets overflowing because I haven’t decided what to do about what is in those messages. And sometimes those messages stay in my inbox for so long that when I finally get to them, it is too late. I have made my decision about what to do through my own indecision. I had run out of time.

We think we have all the time in the world to mend a relationship, to achieve an important goal, to stop a bad habit or begin a good one, to take care of ourselves, to develop our relationship with God, to read important books, to take a stand, or to show that we care. The time is now.

The time to prepare ourselves is now.

The time to renew our covenant with God is now.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians because they were getting anxious that Jesus had not returned yet, and they were nervous about the impact of that delay on the spiritual survival of their family, and their church family members, who had already died, before Jesus had returned. Paul reassured them that their faith in Jesus Christ was well placed. They would meet up again with those they love, and all of us will be with Jesus forever. I think this passage is a wonderfully powerful reminder of a critical function of our life together in this faith community. We help each other to be prepared; to stay on the path; to keep our priorities where they need to be; to take inventory of the little false gods that surround us in life, and to be accountable to each other to keep Walking the Way.

Jesus makes his invitation to us into the Kingdom of God every single day, and at the end of time. God gives us everything we need to be ready. We can be, we should be, filled with excitement. We are connected to the source of love that is unconditional and complete. We are connected to forgiveness that is total and guaranteed. We are connected to grace that is free and unending. We are connected to each other, through our faith family, and through the choices we make about living our life as a reflection of the love God has for us; that is, the choices we make about Walking the Way. God the Holy Spirit gives us a free lifetime supply of lamp oil for our lamps. We only need to come to God every day to top off our oil flasks, and to keep our lamps burning for Christ.

Amen.