

Matthew 25:1-13  
November 12, 2017 Proper 27

Oh, those foolish bridesmaids!! Not sharing their oil – oh. No. Wait. Those were the wise ones.

What is that all about?

Well. To start, we know this is a parable. And parables tend to turn things inside out and upside down.

[Show Box]

Parables, as every Godly Play child knows, come in gold boxes.  
Gold because parables, like gold, are very valuable.  
A box because gifts often come in boxes, and parables are gifts.  
Given to us long before we were born. Which is why this box looks old, because parables are very old. Even older than our grandparents.

And perhaps the most important part about a parable – it has a lid.

[Jiggle lid and Put box down]

A parable will not always open for you. Even when you are ready.

I hope this parable will open for you today, but even if it doesn't, you don't need to worry. You can come back to it any time you like. And when the time is right, the parable will open for you.

Now that we remember how parables work, let's explore this one.

The problem here seems to be the oil. The key to understanding – whatever it means to be wise  
AND  
the thing we get stuck on.

Why can't those "wise" bridesmaids share?! Isn't sharing a core principle of this same kingdom?

What could it be that the oil represents? What can't **WE** share with those who don't have their own – even when we love them – and without which they cannot enter the kingdom?

A few weeks ago, I actually attended a wedding – and I think retelling our parable as this wedding might help us get to that answer.

And to the Good News in this parable.

This was an outdoor wedding. An outdoor wedding in Idaho Springs. In the Fall. It was a gorgeous Saturday in the Colorado mountains – with a high in the mid-40's.

The wedding was scheduled to start at 5pm just as the sun was about to set and the wind picked up. I'm sure it wasn't the coldest wedding ever celebrated in an outdoor venue, but the guests kept our down parkas and gloves on. Some huddled under blankets gathered by the bride's uncle.

In our parable, it was the Bride who was delayed – only by about 10 minutes, but for the bridesmaids in their bare-shouldered dresses it was a VERY COLD 10 minutes!

The wise bride – who is from Minnesota – told the bridesmaids to wear long johns under their dresses, as she did herself.

But some were foolish – and they forgot their long johns in their hotel room.

As they stood in front of the huddled guests, waiting for the bride, imagine if they had turned to their wise sisters and asked, "give us some of your long johns" - !?!

[Wait – eyebrows]

No. That will definitely NOT work. With the best will in the world, you just can't share long johns like that.

So, what in our spiritual lives is like those long johns?

I think it's something we might call Formation – or to use an even more old-fashioned word: Sanctification. And that thinking about the oil this way can also help us begin to think about "the kingdom" as the way that we live in the world today – not just a place we may – or may not – go to when we die.

In his letter to the Philippians (2:12-13), Paul calls this "working out" our own salvation. He says this is what makes it possible for us to "will and to work" for God's purposes. Sanctification – unlike Salvation – is the process of spiritual maturation, of becoming increasingly focused on God's point of view (Oswald Chambers), of developing a "family likeness" to Jesus, or of becoming "saints" ourselves.

Here – at St. Andrew's – we call it "growing in God's love."

It also turns out to be the process of becoming a "citizen" of the kingdom Jesus tells us about – a kingdom I like to call "God's commonwealth of love & justice."

Becoming a citizen of this commonwealth means both experiencing it more fully ourselves AND making its presence more visible – more real - in the world around us.

It does not depend on intellect  
or formal education  
or talent  
or even age.

Everyone is capable of growing spiritually. As we are willing.

Formation takes many different forms, because we are so different, but is always grounded in community – especially regular participation in a worshipping community, what the baptismal covenant calls the “apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and the prayers.”

I’m not saying you need to come to church every Sunday to get into heaven.

Or that doing so will guarantee you happiness or wealth.

But we are here as community every Sunday – at 9, 11, and 5:30. As well as on Thursdays from September through May. Everyone is welcome.

Even as we walk together on this life-long journey of formation, we cannot actually share the fruit of formation in our lives, with others. We cannot “borrow” anyone else’s formation. We have to get it ourselves from the dealers. Times of crisis and loss will always reveal how “wise” we are at this moment.

Where I have not been formed, it may seem as if I have been barred from the wedding banquet. As if the bridegroom does not know me. You can’t share your sanctification with me, no matter how wise or generous you are.

But even though the Gospel parable ends here, the darkness is not permanent and we are not alone.

At a minimum, those other four bridesmaids are out here too!

More importantly, of course, God is with us – especially, in the outer darkness.

As we realize this, we might begin to trust the darkness, committing ourselves each time more fully to sanctification.

We might find our understanding of faith shifting – becoming a matter of the way we live the existential questions:

What is our purpose?

How should we use our freedom?

How do we cope with our fundamental aloneness and mortality?

We might even find ourselves living into those other parts of the baptismal covenant, which at St. Andrew's we call "Offering Sanctuary in the City" and "Seeking the Renewal of the World."

As the growing darkness of Fall and today's parable remind us, We will always fall short.

And when we do, it may feel as if we have been barred from the wedding banquet that is God's transforming love. But our failure is never the end of the story, because even in the darkness, God is waiting to sanctify and transform us – and therefore the world.

And this is Good News indeed.