

Our Gospel reading this morning is from the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew; verses 1 - 13.

But first, if I may, a brief introduction to this passage.

This parable of Jesus is an easy one to remember. Regardless of the two thousand years between the telling of the parable and now, most listeners associate with the excitement of a wedding and the preparations that must take place to ensure a successful and memorable event or series of events. From the entry of the bridesmaids to the final wedding banquet all must be prepared in advance and planned with precision. The parable is about preparation and readiness and the strength and nurturing of one's faith. It is about the light of Christ that defines our faith and the light in each of us ignited when we were baptized and when we put on the clothes of Christ and became one with Him. Jesus is calling us to nurture and nourish our faith to keep the light within from growing faint and going out. The parable with finality of purpose, suggests what will happen if we fail.

Revisiting the text in preparation for today's message, and getting hung up on three words within the parable was unexpected. I was not prepared for this delay. The words, three simple uncomplicated words strung together identifying an action, took me by surprise. The words [*trimmed their lamps*] were read multiple times as part of the full passage and repeated dozens of times as a stand-alone fragment. With thanksgiving for the gift of the scripture, the words seemed to stir old and beautiful memories that I had not visited for a while. With your indulgence, I would like to share the memories with you in a few minutes. Through the telling of the story you will meet two strong women of faith; one whose job it was to keep kept their lamps trimmed and the lights burning; and, the other who nurtured and nourished those who had lost their way and encouraged those who knew where they were going and how to get there.

It took a week's worth of reading and rereading to narrow the passage to those three words - trimmed their lamps - as the source of my unrest. Only reluctantly would I get past this part of the scripture lesson to read the rest of the story. Of all passages – why this one.

With your permission, we will come back to this dilemma shortly.

But right now, God calls us to be diligent; to stay the course and to return to the message of the text; God calls us to put all else aside and come to the text each time prepared and ready to hear again the Word as spoken through the Gospels...and to hear each time as if for the first time. For the hearing of God's Holy Word, let us pray:

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy and surprise what you say to us today.

Amen

*Matthew 25:1-13 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*

25 "Then.... the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids<sup>[a]</sup> took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.<sup>[b]</sup> 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' 7 Then all those bridesmaids<sup>[c]</sup> got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 9 But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids<sup>[d]</sup> came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' 12 But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.<sup>[e]</sup>

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks Be to God.**

Let's think about this for a minute.

If, instead of teaching through the parable, Jesus said, "I'm telling you all of these things because soon I will be riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, I'll celebrate Passover with the disciples, be condemned to death on Friday, and on Sunday, Mary Magdalen and my mother will discover the tomb is empty, you will celebrate my resurrection; and I will ascend into heaven where I will welcome the faithful into Paradise."

But who would believe this? The naysayers and doubters continued to reject Jesus as the Messiah. They even witnessed Jesus' miracles and still they did not believe. The faithful whose hearts were open to the hearing of God's Word would know and understand and heed the message. In this parable, the identity of the bridesmaids is made visible to the reader in the lamps they carry. The lamps of the five wise women are trimmed and ready. Their faith, like the flame from their lamps, is strong and burns clear and bright. The flames from the lamps of the five foolish bridesmaids are dark and smoky and the light, like their faith, eventually will weaken and die. The women all look the same but they are not. The details of the parable and image of a common oil lamp distinguishes for the reader the five wise bridesmaids from the five foolish bridesmaids. It's the interior self and the absence or presence of faith that makes the difference in their identity.

Five of the women are *alive in the spirit* and are similar in this regard to the painting of the woman depicted on the cover of today's bulletin. The painting is the work of the 17<sup>th</sup>- century French Baroque painter (1593-1652) George de La Tour. He is known for his religious paintings and scenes of everyday life pictured in the reality of a sparse interior. Of his personal faith, we know only that he tried to emulate the spirit of St. Francis through his support and participation of a Franciscan-led religious revival. He was a member of the Third Order of Franciscans where individuals could participate as a lay member without vows. Late in his life, de La Tour turned solely to religious paintings.

I know de La Tour only as an artist who was influenced by Caravaggio, a 16<sup>th</sup>- century Italian painter who had a strong influence on the artists who followed including de La Tour.

Coincidentally, since we are in Matthew's Gospel today, it is interesting to note that Caravaggio was known by his masterpiece *The Calling of St. Matthew* depicting the moment when Matthew dropped everything and did not hesitate when called by Jesus to serve as one of the twelve.



Let's stay with the bulletin cover for just a minute and take another look at the bulletin cover and *The Penitent Magdalen*. A witness of Christ, Magdalen renounced her former life for a life of faithful allegiance to Christ. In de La Tour's painting, she is seated at table where an oil lamp burns clean and bright. She is composed and deep in her thoughts. Around her are the symbols reminding her and us of our own mortality. The skull on her lap, known as a memento mori, invites us to reflect on the vanity of earthly life and the transient nature of all earthly goods and pursuits. The skull reminds us that we, too, must die. The burning candle is interrupted as the light of Christ and the spiritual presence of God. The dark and light

contrast of candlelight and shadow in such a closed-in space as de La Tour has given us in this painting is characteristic of the pictures for which de la Tour is famous.

In contrast to *The Penitent Magdalen*, is de La Tour's *Magdalen of the Smoking Flame*. While she shares the same attributes in the candle, the mirror, the skull, and the sparse setting as *The Penitent Magdalen*, a subtle difference is found in the presentation of Magdalen. Here she appears less confident. The candle burns a dark and smoky flame. The two paintings seem to illustrate the parable for us. Was this the intent of the painter? Are we trying too hard and reading too much into the paintings, hoping to find there a connection that would confirm the two paintings as a reference to Matthew's Gospel and our passage this morning? Given the artist's religious back ground it's possible that he may have presented us with two paintings that silently convey Matthew's retelling of Jesus' parable of the Bridegroom and the ten Bridesmaids.

The images visually take us back to the parable and to first-century Palestine where women except for a few special events including preparation for a wedding led a private life with little activity in the public arena. In the parables and stories of Jesus, women are significant to the telling of the story. Some writers have expressed surprise that the authors of Jesus biographies would even mention the presence of women.



But, it would be hard to tell the story of Matthew 25 if women were absent or relegated to the shadows. Matthew's sensitivity would not have allowed him to leave the women in the shadows; their presence is evident throughout his gospel. We've watched Matthew in his own ministry as he encouraged the new believers to bring their own traditions and customs into their new life with Christ. Matthew encouraged the faithful as they worked to build up the

body of Christ in the community of the faithful...but, for today, we will leave the historical context of the first century and its importance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century for another lesson.

So, too, for another time, is the influence of this parable in a variety of disciplines: classical music, ballet, theatre for one-act plays as early as the 11<sup>th</sup>- century or in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century hymn: Our lamps are trimmed and burning, our robes are white and clean, we've tarried for the Bridegroom, Oh, may we enter in? The mention of a Blues Gospel favorite and its title, "Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning" returns us to beginning of our message today and to the surprise in the scriptures that inspired this message.

Now, if I may, I'd like to explain the gifts of the parable that came unexpectedly as a beautiful memory. I would like for you to meet two great women of faith, Mary Louise McGougan Louden who stands on the shoulders of her mother, my grandmother Dula Allsbrook McGougan, a pillar of strength and faith. Her faith was an inspiration to her church community and to the greater community and to all of us; the kith and kin, the first cousins and the second and so on.

These two women are always with me defining and influencing my actions and my beliefs, and helping to nourish my faith. Revisiting the Gospel lesson, I found in the scriptures a surprise when the words took an extraordinary turn and delivered me to a place and time known only from the stories related to us by our mother. Born in 1919 in a small town in North Carolina, she was the 7<sup>th</sup> of 12 children. Faith, for the McGougans, was at the center of everything; and reading the scriptures was paramount to everything else. A favorite memory from summer vacations at grandmother's, were the times after lunch when we stayed at the kitchen table while grandmother read scripture. This was not an option. First scriptures then play. In my mind's eye, I still visualize those early afternoons and now, after revisiting Matthew's Gospel this week, the images are vivid and the memories stronger than I remember. Mother had many stories to tell of growing up in such a large family as the McGougans where all the children had daily chores. Mother's chore each morning was to [trim their wicks] to prepare the oil lamps for the coming evening; to cut off the charred edges of the wicks from the night before. If the

wick is not trimmed, the light will not burn as brightly, her mother told her; it will be smoky and soon it would go out. With careful observation and attention, the lamps would be ready throughout the day if needed and into the night. The brief passage in Matthew's Gospel had filled my heart with a flood of memories. The scriptures are full of surprises.

The scriptures had presented a beautiful and unexpected gift in an easily translated message. The passage had not changed - the scripture does not change - only the reflections we take from the Holy Book as we grow and change and find clarity of meaning in our own lives.

My grandmother would have used the freshness of the wicks and the trimming of their lamps to talk about God's great gift of forgiveness. Each day is a new day for the believer; each day we are offered a fresh start, a new day in Christ to continue our ministry in our everyday lives; setting examples for others; drawing others in, building on our spiritual inheritance and helping others build theirs; engaging and proclaiming; not professing faith with empty promises, but building a rich existence that is alive in the Spirit. It is the light of Christ within that defines us as active Christians; it's about the light of preparation ignited when we were baptized when we put on the clothes of Christ preparing and ready to become one with Him; It is Christ in us – that keeps the light shining, the fire burning and our faith strong. AMEN