

Joshua 24: 14-27
Matthew 25:1-13
November 12, 2017
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

The event recorded in the book of Joshua offers an apt context for Jesus' parable. The Israelites have entered the land of Canaan. They are flush with the experience of success. I suspect that they are already forming legends about their exploits in the wilderness and how they braved all the dangers and overcame all the challenges. It is a great and epic tale in which they, not God, not Moses or Joshua, are the heroes.

We sense Joshua's skepticism as he confronts the Israelites on the eve of their dispersal to their allotted lands. "Who will you serve?" he demands. "Will you serve the Lord who led you and your fathers from slavery, through the wilderness despite your constant rebellion and complaining and led you to this land? Will you worship and serve the God who drove out all the peoples who lived in this land and glorify him alone? Or will you forget the Lord your God and serve the god's of the peoples who God drove out. Will you build idols like they did? Will you engage in all their detestable practices designed to make you prosperous and forget the Lord your God the *true* source of your life?"

"Oh yes!" they reply. We will always put God first! Several times Joshua confronts them with this challenge. Each time they affirm their loyalty to God. Joshua is clearly unconvinced. He builds a memorial pile of stones to remind the Israelites of their promise and sends them on their way. The rest of the history of Israel in the land of Canaan bears witness that Joshua was all too right to doubt the fidelity of the people to God.

Many centuries later God called a man named Mohammed to bring his message to the Arab nomads of the Saudi peninsula. His message met with great hostility and soon, like the Israelites of old, he was compelled to drive those hostile to the message of Allah from the land. He called this *jihad* or holy war. Yet unlike so many crusaders, Mohammed recognized that conquering territory was only the first step in a much larger struggle.

Having driven the enemies of Allah out, Mohammed announced that the *true* jihad had just begun. It was the holy war within each human being to submit all human desires to the rule of Allah. Mohammed knew what every generation forgets: those wars against one's external enemies are only temporary and futile if human beings do not conduct the holy war of submitting to God in all things.

This is no more and no less than what Joshua spoke to the Israelites.

It is also the clear and enduring message of Jesus who proclaimed, "Seek first *God's kingdom* and *God's righteousness* and everything else you seek will be yours." And I propose that this proclamation is our doorway to understanding the parable of the wise and foolish young women.

As I indicated before reading the text, the parable is part of a much larger teaching about keeping faith in times when God seems absent. How do we witness to our trust that God is faithful even in the apparent absence of any evidence? How do we be signs of hope--that is, of expectation--that God will overcome evil and establish his reign of peace?

The parable tells a story of ten chaste young women. It is their job to welcome the bridegroom home so that the wedding feast may begin. It is important to the bridegroom that the banquet be highly anticipated. The women are chosen because they have been utterly devoted to the wellbeing of the bridegroom. They have forsaken all other earthly and intimate relationships

in order to serve the bridegroom. It is the calling of these women to create the atmosphere of joyful expectation about the return of the bridegroom and the great banquet that waits. To that end the women bring lamps of oil.

These lamps are significant for two reasons: Most obvious is the fact that they will light the way for the bridegroom as he journeys to the banquet. Yet on a much deeper level, their lamps signify their faith and hope that the bridegroom *will indeed return*.

Then comes the moment of crisis-- *the bridegroom is delayed!* A division appears among the ten young women. Five have just enough oil for their greeting *as long as everything goes according to plan and the bridegroom arrives on schedule*. The other five have anticipated that the bridegroom's arrival is not predictable. To be ready for his arrival one must have oil to spare. Thus it is that these women who had prepared themselves for the bridegroom's arrival *whenever he came* were ready. The others missed the banquet. The pain of not having prepared and missing the joy of the banquet was hard to bear.

Friends, this is a parable. It is told to awaken devotion and urgency. It is also a plea for spiritual hardiness, like hardy mums which can survive the first frost. Jesus is not like the bridegroom who shuts people out because they had run out of oil. If that was the case on any given day none of us would be ready.

But thanks be to God that what we may not hold individually on any given day we hold as a community. The church of Jesus collectively is called to be a sign of the return of Jesus. We are called to keep faith, hope and godly love alive in a dark and uncertain world. When the lamp of any one of us burns low and is in danger of going out it is refilled by being part of a community of hope.

The good news of Jesus is that in community the vital light giving oil of faith, hope and love is in endless supply. To return to the image which began our pledge campaign for Christ's ministry for the coming year, our roots reach deep into the stream of life giving water. We bear fruit in times of prosperity; but most importantly in times of spiritual drought. Is this not what our pledges for the year to come represent-- our expectation that Christ will be with us in the year to come?

To a world tossed about by news of violence, fear and deep ideological conflict, what better place to find a safe and reassuring place of life and light: a community of human beings who, despite all the apparent evidence expect to meet the Lord in the land of the living!

Let us be that community!

Amen