

Next Sunday, we will offer our pledge cards at the altar with thanks, thanks for all our Lord has done for us and all the ways we know his presence through this community of faith. I am grateful to Pat Ayers who offered a reflection at 8 a.m. of what St. Thomas has meant to her over the past seventy five years. I was reminded of the depth of relationships and her deep rootedness in this community of Christ's followers. At 10 a.m. we heard from Gwen Prosser and her recognition that we are all unique members in the body of Christ. She reminded us of the many ways we help change lives for the good and noted how our offerings placed on the altar are blessed and flow back out into the world to be the healing and renewing presence of Christ to others.

I was at first put off by the Gospel reading for today because at first glance it seemed to fly in the face of everything I had come to believe about our stewardship of all the God has given us. I believe that God is one of abundance in giving, there is always more than enough and scarcity is simply not part of Christ's vocabulary. Yet the five wise maidens seem to say, "There is not enough." (I wonder, hmmm). Furthermore, the five foolish maidens are not admitted to the banquet. And yet I know our Lord to be gracious and welcoming of all. (Hmmm, I wonder). So let's take a closer look at this challenging Gospel.

Imagine that you are at an eastern wedding celebration. Ten young women go out as dusk falls to escort the bridegroom. Five take care to have enough oil in their lamps for a long wait, five do not. When the bridegroom finally arrives they are all asleep. The five with oil to spare are ready quickly. The others ask them for oil but are refused.

Jesus is teaching a spiritual truth. The young women stand for all of us who seek what Jesus calls a kingdom. They are all of us who have come to realize that Jesus can be the source of meaning and purpose in our lives. For us, he can be the bridegroom we want to welcome into our lives. To find him we have to search and that search is going to take us into some dark places. We are going to need light to find our way. And the first glimpse of that light can be that urge within us to seek our Lord in the first place. Jesus is not some elusive figure who wants to make it difficult for us to find him; he seeks us too!

Some have sufficient oil and others do not. I think Jesus is saying that we must be realistic about the spiritual journey we are on. Spirituality in a human life does not just happen; it requires effort, time, attention, faithfulness, just like any skill or sport we hone.

Jesus says, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Someone once quipped that you can tell a person's priorities in life by looking at their check book (or credit card statement). And indeed, we can each conduct a wellness check for ourselves.

As with any physical journey we must make preparations, lay up supplies, and pack carefully.

Remember how the wise maidens refused to share their oil? The fact that there is not enough oil for both groups tells me that faith can never be borrowed. Faith must always be a personal possession and there must be a personal commitment to keeping it alight.

I was in ninth grade and attentive to a classmate named Debbie. She had invited me to come to her church, the First Baptist Church in Hartland. It was an evening service that concluded in an altar call in which participants could make a personal commitment of faith. I thought about the

experience and realized that we Episcopalians do the same every Sunday. I say “yes” to Jesus every time I stand and recite the ancient creed. I say “yes” to Jesus every time I walk to the altar and hold out my hands begging to be fed. I say “yes” to our Lord when I leave this place with those words still ringing in my ear, “Go in peace to love and serve...” Faith can be caught from someone else. It can be fanned into flame in us by someone else’s love and encouragement, but once it flickers into flame in the lamp of our spirit, it needs a commitment from us to keep it lit. If we are ready to make that commitment our life can be transformed. To possess the light of Christ is to possess something beyond price.

I invite you to join me next Sunday as we offer “ourselves, our souls, and bodies” or to put it another way, “our time, talent, and treasure” to present our lamps full of oil, wicks trimmed, burning brightly with the light of Christ.

The Rev. Paul Briggs
24th Sunday After Pentecost, November 12, 2023
St. Thomas’ Church, Camden