

November 9
Pentecost 26
Wise and Foolish Virgins
Matthew 25:1-13

Any one who wishes to learn what concentrated attention is like might well observe her cat. At the slightest noise, Anna's head goes up, ears perked, at attention, here eyes riveted at a spot where something fascinating might appear, and, whatever it is, an ant, a fly, becomes worthy of ultimate attention and action, with an exploratory paw touch, at least.

Children, too. My nine-month old nephew, on his hands and knees, exploring the floor in a corner of the living room, looked up at a sun beam, gazing with wide eyes at the particles of dust floating in the air, rapt, mesmerized; I could hear his quiet breathing.

Our cats and our children know something about life that the foolish virgins did not. That life, if it is to be meaningful, is about concentration, focus, devotion, keeping one's eye on the ball, as we say, which is true not only for tennis and base and football but about how to live our days. Such attention teaches us how to act.

Did you notice that all the maidens were already invited and part of the wedding party; normally they would accompany the bride-to-be as she goes to meet her betrothed; but in this strange parable the bride is not mentioned; and the foolish bridesmaids lost track of the main event, and of the importance of anticipation and alertness in their waiting—were they bored and easily distracted; or the shallow, passive kind of person who likes to be involved in the planning but expects others to carry out the action?. Were they not unconvinced of the importance and joy of this wedding? Did they not love the bride or bridegroom?

Whether bored, passive, or lacking in love, they would not make good Christians.

Luther: *Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*: "O it is a living, busy, acting, might thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever." *Matthew: A Commentary*, p. 545

This parable says that is not possible to be partly a Christian. That opportunities to see God and to be prepared to participate in a celebration of love can be lost if we are not prepared.

The wise virgins took enough oil so that their lamps were lit and they could properly accompany the bride and groom into the banquet. It's like the candles we light on Christmas Eve or on the Saturday before Easter. We welcome new life, the light of the living Christ into our lives. We celebrate the coming of love.

Now, it's important to understand two things. The first is the difference in understanding of time between that of the early church and now. In the time of the early church, people had expected Jesus to come soon; Jesus may have expected God's kingdom to come within a generation. But as generations passed, the future stretched forward. People strained to look to Jesus' second coming, and longed for the time when he would appear again on earth and fulfill all his promises and the kingdom of God of peace, love and justice become reality.

“This parable teaches Christians how to sustain relationship with Christ over time.

But two thousand years after Jesus death, we know the immensity of time. Not only is God's time not our's. Time's extent is unimaginable. The universe was created 16 billion years ago. God is working his purposes out over unimaginable scales of time and space. And, then we no longer think of God as a fatherly figure in heaven so much as a spirit imbedded in our lives. Scientists tell us that the chairs you sit on and this pulpit are not so much material as composed of wave and particle. God is enmeshed, we are beginning to see more deeply, in all things; the spirit of God is not separated from material life and is present in ways we can't see but can experience all around us. Celtic spirituality, poets, mystics, Jesus, and St. Paul all understood this.

The second thing to understand is related to the first; the wedding banquet is always with us. But it takes faith to see it and participate. At Holy Communion we celebrate the banquet.

I think that each of us is one of the maidens. The time-honored symbol of virginity as meaning purity, or being undivided, through the centuries has been used by poets and mystics to describe the soul, the inner being, of people who are close to God, even to describe a marriage relationship between the soul and God as possible and beautiful.

So, we are to nourish habits of the heart; to discover God's illusive but real presence.

Time honored ways of living in faith, of being “virginal” are deepening prayer and loving service.

I'd like to return again to speak about the Beatitudes, which we considered last Sunday. The sixth Beatitude, “Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God.”

And, seeing God is exactly what the foolish virgins could not do. For the bridegroom shut the door against them.

How to be pure of heart? How to be like a wise virgin, with enough oil, prepared to meet love?

When Jesus said “blessed are the pure of heart,” he blesses people's core self (Lat., *cor*, “heart”). The heart was seen in Jesus' time as “the human center, the home of personal feeling, willing, and thinking.

To be pure in heart: is to be “clear at center.” Clear and focused.

Meditation and silent prayer, which someone has called listening to the heartbeat of the universe, is keeping the oil of faith and practicing being pure of heart. The practice of prayer, is setting aside 20 minutes each day, to listen to God. Not to our own thoughts, but to God. It’s a habit that leads to readiness, watchfulness, concentration, an investment in seeing God more clearly, loving him more dearly, following him more nearly..

In sum, centered persons will be given the “inestimable gift of the vision of God.” Both, clearer knowledge of Jesus now and vision of God in coming Kingdom.

And the purpose? To understand and take into the heart Jesus’ teachings and know fresh ways to apply Jesus’ truth to new situations/

In a word, keeping enough oil has to do with living in kingdom of God and acting as a citizen of the kingdom. It is allowing God to dust off the mirrors of our souls, to more perfectly reflect his light.

It was said through the ages that no one could see God and live.

Yet, St. Paul, in his beautiful, mystical hymn to love: 1 Cor. 13, holds out this hope: “now we see in a mirror dimly but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.”