

November 8, 2020

Stewardship Sunday



St. John

United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

10207 Lincoln Trail

Fairview Heights, IL

Telephone 397-6323

SECRETARY – JUDY HARTMANN

Rev. Rosemary Captain

Organist – Sharon Banjavcic

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS:

*RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:

Respond with words in bold type.

Put away the things you have substituted for God.
Let your worship of the one true God be genuine.

**We seek to know God and to rejoice before our
Creator.**

We know that God is beyond all our false images.

God is not deceived by our solemn assemblies.

Our empty festivals do not impress our God.

**We want to give joyous expression to a growing
faith.**

We choose to serve the God whom Jesus revealed.

Our hope is in God's grace beyond all judgment.

Our trust is in God's love, greater than our feeble
imitation.

We welcome the light God promises us.

We seek to respond with faithful service.

*UNISON PRAYER OF INVOCATION:

**God of our ancestors, be our God today as we
gather in sincerity and faithfulness to honor you.**

**Attune our hearts to your commandments as we
remember your mighty acts. Declare your Word to
us so we may be inspired to obey. We know that
we must decide today whether or not we will serve
you. Not to decide is to reject you. O God, save us
from the idols that appear so attractive to us, the
toys that take so much of our attention and the
pursuits that dominate our time. Make your
dwelling place with us here. Amen.**

SCRIPTURE READING: **Matthew 25:1-13**

25 “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten young bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the groom. ² Now five of them were wise, and the other five were foolish. ³ The foolish ones took their lamps but didn’t bring oil for them. ⁴ But the wise ones took their lamps and also brought containers of oil.

⁵ “When the groom was late in coming, they all became drowsy and went to sleep. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Look, the groom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ “Then all those bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps. ⁸ But the foolish bridesmaids said to the wise ones, ‘Give us some of your oil, because our lamps have gone out.’

⁹ “But the wise bridesmaids replied, ‘No, because if we share with you, there won’t be enough for our lamps and yours. We have a better idea. You go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ But while they were gone to buy oil, the groom came. Those who were ready went with him into the wedding. Then the door was shut.

¹¹ “Later the other bridesmaids came and said, ‘Lord, lord, open the door for us.’ ¹² “But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’

¹³ “Therefore, keep alert, because you don’t know the day or the hour.

In the hearing of your Word,
may we choose to serve you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

MESSAGE: **“Being Prepared While We Wait”**

(I apologize for the length of this message; yet to get the most meat off of the bones, we need a little explanation. Are we eating beef or chicken or turkey? Be patient while we dig in to discover what this food is that we are tasting.)



The first Sunday of Advent is just 3 weeks away, November 29. Advent is a season of preparation and waiting for the celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas.

The Gospel of Matthew, that we have been reading for almost a year, concludes with a string of four “advent parables”, each one a picture of what it will be like when the kingdom of heaven finally comes, and each one addresses some problem or issue that the author’s church was experiencing as they waited for the kingdom’s advent.

Just to review, our Gospel teachings all have 3 lessons in each one. The first was when Jesus actually said the teachings while he was on earth. The second is when the story was written down, sometimes 60 years later, and when each author was trying to teach his new Christian church. The third lesson is when we the readers read each teaching and apply it to our present lives and churches. This narrative, Matthew 25:1-13, has a message especially for the second and third group of hearers.

The first “Advent Parable” can be read in Matthew 24:45-51. Please read it at your leisure. It has to do with a Head Servant who has the responsibility to remain faithful to his assigned tasks while his Master is away and has been delayed in his returning. The Head Servant is in charge of giving the other servants their allowance of food at the proper time. The longer the Master does not return, the closer the servant is to becoming a slacker and allowing the household to crumble.

This parable is addressed to the church and has clear allegorical overtones. (I’ll explain allegories in a minute.) The delayed master is Christ, and the head servant represents the leadership of the church who is assigned the responsibility of feeding others spiritually and physically. When Christ does not return quickly, the leadership no longer saves a place at the table for the coming messiah and instead the church simply gorges itself.

The second “advent parable” that we have today, continues the theme of the delayed kingdom. Just to further explain these parables, Jesus uses what we now call allegory and symbolism.

Essentially, symbolism is the use of words, characters, locations, or abstract ideas as symbols to represent something beyond their literal meaning. An allegory is a narrative work that utilizes symbolism to offer a broader moral or deeper meaning for the reader. In allegory, nearly all elements of the narrative typically can be interpreted as having a symbolic meaning that enhances the broader

meaning of the story. These parables can also be called “stories within stories.”

So now we come to the lesson for today, the Ten Bridesmaids. I admit that I never quite understood this parable until I read the background that I just gave you. My excellent commentary written by Rev. Thomas Long has helped me carve into this “dish”.

Two things to keep in mind as we examine this story; weddings in ancient times were different than today. It was the custom for bridesmaids to accompany the groom into the banquet hall and then to ensure security from robbers or wedding crashers, the doors were locked after they arrived. Using these familiar customs, Jesus effectively brings his audience into the story.



The other thing to remember is that everything in the story is a symbol for something or somebody else, let’s look at our story again. The wedding banquet is a symbol of the kingdom of heaven and the long-awaited bridegroom clearly is the expected Son of Man, Jesus Christ. The strange picture of the bridegroom’s midnight arrival reflects the idea that the messiah will come at an unexpected time, like a thief in the night. The cry of the foolish bridesmaids, who didn’t have enough oil for their lamps to last while they waited, “Lord, lord. . .,” and the sad response of the groom, “I do not know you . . .”, echoes the judgment of Matthew, where “not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord,

will enter the kingdom of heaven” and Christ will turn away from evildoers with a dire, “I never knew you.”

But what about the oil? It has to do with preparation. All ten of the bridesmaids were eager for the groom to arrive, however the wise ones were prepared for the groom’s delay. The bridegroom, like the kingdom of heaven, did not arrive promptly; he was delayed and some 2000 years later, the kingdom is still delayed.

The wise ones in the church are those who are prepared for the delay; who hold on to the faith deep into the night; who, even though they see no bridegroom coming, still serve and hope and pray and wait for the promised victory of God. Many will finally despair and turn away in discouragement, saying, “the bridegroom has left us standing at the altar, the banquet is off, there is no kingdom life is just one curses thing after another with no goal or end.”

But then in the middle of history’s long night, when the world least expects it, a cry will go up, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Here, at last, the long-expected Jesus. Come out to meet him.” Are you prepared?



PASTORAL PRAYER:

Beginning with a time for silent personal prayer Our faithful God, who loves us no matter what, listen to our cries. We are people of short-patience and short-temper. We want all the best food for



Thanksgiving, all the family at our house, and all the bests gifts for Christmas and we want them NOW!

Help us realize, Heavenly Teacher, that this year is different from no other. Because of the pandemic, we can not have a crowd in our homes, we may not be able to have a large feast, just small tastes of all the traditional foods. We may not be able to get to the mall and shop till we drop. We may have to postpone all our usual plans for a safer holiday time in our community. We don’t want to spread a virus we can not see and infect and perhaps kill our family and friends.

The best gift we can give our family and friends is the gift of keeping our distance, wearing our masks, washing out hands, and limiting our gatherings. We will do all these things because we love and care for each other. We can’t buy that at the mall.

We pray for peace during the post-election time. We keep all pastors in our prayers as they continue to provide spiritual support and creative services during this unprecedented time.

We pray for the people of the United States as we work towards equality and civility for us all. We pray for the healthcare workers and first responders

who have put their lives on the line to protect us.

We offer special prayers for the families who are dealing with loved ones who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and are not able to visit them in person for support. Give strength to the sick and to those who are struggling with separation. And now we join our hearts and voices to the prayer Jesus taught us . . .

THE LORD'S PRAYER:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

THANK YOU FOR SHARING: How will our neighbors be prepared for times of crisis? Who will teach them where to find oil for their lamps? Who will help them discover spiritual riches more valuable than all their material possessions? Our church is a resource, and our ministry is for the whole world. Let us always give our support.

UNISON: PRAYER OF DEDICATION:

We set our hope in you, God of all ages, and seek to serve you through our offerings and our efforts to encourage and equip one another for ministry. Help us decide daily to live according to your will,

preparing ourselves for the opportunities and challenges you give us. May your rule shape our lives in ways that introduce many to the joys of eternity in the midst of time. Amen

RESPONSIVE COMMISSION AND BLESSING:

God expects our complete loyalty and devotion.

God's love frees us for joyous living.

We will serve the God we have met here.

We know that God goes with us everywhere.

May worship continue wherever we go.

May our service extend God's love to all we meet.

We will consult God in our daily choices.

We will respond to others in the spirit of Christ.

God is faithful in covenant with us.

The counsel of God is always available to us.

We will take time to rest in God's promises.

We will listen for God's word of hope.

Amen. **Amen.**



PRAYER LIST: Rich Schmitt, Nelson Libell, Dave Seneczyn, Eric White, Lori Riess, Donna Isselhard, Mitch Nallie, Candy Pearce, Greg Talley, Carol Meyer, Leah Williams, Pat Holtgrave, Jane Riess, Shari Hamilton, Becky Ballard, Amy Annis, Kim Martin

(If you know of any of these people who could be removed from the list, please let the Secretary know.)