

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 27a  
Amos 5:18-24  
I Thessalonians 4:13-18  
Matthew 25:1-13

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You know what it's like when you're waiting for someone. No matter how alert you try to be, it's easy to miss that moment of arrival. I don't know how many times I've sat waiting in my car in a parking lot, waiting to pick up our teenage son Andrew... I always try to keep an eye out but you know, inevitably I'll look down at my phone, or space out gazing in the distance, so more often than not I'm caught unawares when Andrew raps on the window. I startle and jump with surprise. It is so easy to miss that arrival.

Jesus' parable is about an arrival no one wants to miss-- the arrival of a wedding party. Ten young women, teenagers, are preparing to make the wedding feast merry by performing a joyful dance of light. They will hold their oil lamps high and dance to welcome the bride and groom when they arrive. But there's been a delay. Back then, village weddings would last for days, the bride and groom moving from house to house to house. These girls didn't get to decide when the wedding parade would get there and sweep them into the fun. They just had to stay ready.

But waiting is hard for anyone, especially teenagers. At first they were excited and impatient, chatting, gossiping, thinking about everything *except* keeping enough oil in their lamps. As the hours went on, boredom crept in. They leaned up against the wall of the house and wrapped their cloaks tighter. One by one they all dozed off.

When the moment finally came and a shout went up, some woke up ready to join the big event, dancing with their lamps held high. But others missed out. Their oil was gone, and when they ran off to buy more they missed that arrival – and all the fun.

When you're keeping vigil, it can be hard to stay vigilant. And on one level, we Christians think of ourselves as keeping a cosmic vigil. We live in a time between the times. Between Christ's saving work of dying and rising from the grave – and Christ's promise to return again and restore all creation. Keeping the faith means staying awake and being ready to greet Christ's return one day -- but it's not only that. On a more immediate level, keeping the faith means staying alert to all the different ways Christ shows up in our lives *every day*.

This year, perhaps more than any other year, we can really relate to the bridesmaids' challenge of waiting. We've had a lot of practice, waiting! These eight months of pandemic can sometimes seem like a long dark night when time has become weirdly fluid. For a while there, the only way we could tell day from night is when we changed out of sweat pants into pajamas! We may have moved a little beyond that earliest confusion, but even now it can often be hard to remember what day of the week it is, *Tuesday? Thursday?* A friend gave up and said, *I just call it "Blur-day."*

Anticipating the final return of Christ might not be top of our list right now. What we're waiting for right is a final election tally people can agree on. What we're really waiting for now is a good vaccine. Though some days we'd be satisfied with just a really tasty takeout meal. Or a deep belly laugh. Or a good conversation where we feel heard and understood. Or a moment of natural beauty – like the sunrise I woke up to on the morning after the election, so lovely I had to take a picture. In the midst of all that tension and drama and anxiety, it seemed like a real blessing that hey, the sun still came up! The world still turns. All of this is still in God's hands.

These days, we are getting to know the dynamics of being in something for the long haul. We are learning patience. Words like perseverance and resilience make more sense to us today than ever before. And we want those qualities for ourselves and those around us. Patience, resilience. We strive to keep hope alive, not to give up, but even more to press forward with a sense of meaning and purpose, and holy calling.

All of this is what our stewardship team had in mind in choosing this year's theme: ***"Keeping the Faith and Ready to Share."*** And choosing this image of keeping a light burning, ready to ready to share with others. (Share logo on screen)

It reminds us of baptism, when the candle is presented with Jesus' words: *"Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven."* That's what we're put on earth to do, to tend the light of Christ and share that light with others. And this is exactly what we do together in this congregation at First Immanuel. (Stop share)

As we ***keep the faith*** together in this highly unusual time, we have both a beautiful calling and a wonderful promise.

The promise is that Christ does not just arrive for us on some yet-to-be-known final day, but Christ arrives *every day*, creating a feast of communion and community and love and hope and justice that our Lord invites us into, right now, every moment.

Our life with God truly is a joyful feast, an ongoing event, a series of encounters with the holy and the human, celebrating unconditional love and outreaching compassion and insistent justice. Faith is a series of arrivals where God breaks in to lift us up, inspire, encourage, challenge, love and forgive. And we don't want to miss any of it!

Every day there is a wake-up call, a rap on the car window inviting us to let our Lord in to our lives. Whether it's an opportunity to be a good neighbor, make a phone call, write a card, deliver some food, listen, care. Or build a bridge with someone different from us, make a start at mending old divisions between rich and poor, gender identities, racial identities, or political parties, learn a new perspective and promote healing. Being open to God means welcoming the chance to be surprised, and blessed, get a second wind, find God alive where perhaps we had kind of given up. Being open to God means strength for our personal responsibilities, and wisdom to be active citizens. We don't want to miss a thing when it comes to meeting God alive today.

In community at First Immanuel, we keep the faith as we experience the goodness of God, here in worship at the table of the Lord. Other days might be "Blur-days" to us, but we know when it's Sunday, and this faith community is a given. It helps us stay connected and moving down the right path. This worship time gets us through the week.

United with each other and Christ through bread and wine, baptismal water and God's holy Word... we find our bedrock, our foundation, the roots that allow us to stand firm when so much is shifting around us. Being part of a congregation lets us know that when we offer "this little light of mine" it is never something tiny or insignificant – because the light of faith that each of us offers, the lamps of faith we keep trimmed and burning, are added together with the whole family of faith in God's Spirit to shine Christ's light brightly, together. It is God who keeps this faith alive among us, and we give thanks.

And what about that second part of our theme, *Keeping the Faith and **Ready to Share?***

As I recall, in the parable, those bridesmaids were not ready – all of them fell asleep!

And they did not share – the ones who had oil refused to share it with the others.

There's something stingy about it that turns us off. Because in the end, five of those bridesmaids didn't make it into the party after all.

It seems like there is so much wrong with the ending of this parable. But that is actually its genius. Remember: parables are meant to provoke us. So if this parable gets under our skin, that's good! It's waking us up to something.

Maybe it's waking us to how sincerely we desire that all people on earth will know and benefit from Christ's love – *all people* – so nobody will be left out.

Maybe it's waking us up to the beauty of sharing – sharing oil, sharing love, sharing money, whatever it may be. It's been my experience that sharing my own resources – and especially being generous financially – leads to a sense of freedom and abundance that stinginess could never produce. Being generous is joyful thing! When we share what we have, abundance multiplies, and we participate in something greater than we can fully understand.

This parable could very well provoke us to a radical generosity which challenges the messages our world sends and marks us as people who answer to a higher call. In a world that says, it's every person out for themselves, I've got mine and it's up to you to go get yours, and tough luck if you can't... the people of Christ choose to share. We choose to be generous. We choose the self-giving way of our Lord.

And specifically today, as we consider our pledges, we choose to share so that all people can experience what is not to be missed – the community of God, the life of Christ as we have come to know it, the compassion and care and justice God inspires in our hurting world.

When we pledge our support, we are saying we want First Immanuel congregation to continue welcoming people to the feast of joyful relationship with God. Welcoming all people to experience the reign of God alive right now. As people *ready to share*, we will never get sidetracked by worry or fear about what we *do not* have. We will consider the gifts God *has* given us and we will decide with confidence what we *can* give, cheerfully and with a whole heart – to participate in the great feast and celebration that is community in Christ. Together, we do have enough to do the ministry God intends for us.

A friend of mine traveled to the Middle East a few years ago, and he happened to be in a small town when a wedding was taking place. He was surprised to discover that weddings there are not like weddings here. Here we carefully parcel out invitations for a select group of people to attend. There, the whole town was invited to eat, drink, and be merry. Even the American tourist just passing through was swept up into the wedding feast – and it was a lot of fun! Something he'll never forget.

That's what we want for everyone. To know Christ's welcome. To be at home in Christ's love. Thanks be to God. Amen.