**Faith With Reserves**

Amos 5:18-24

Matthew 25:1-13

Our Gospel story today about five bridesmaids who get the door   
shut in their faces is a story that would have been music to the ears of the eldest son who found his dad’s welcome home party for his prodigal brother, completely unacceptable. You remember how the Prodigal Son story Jesus tells goes. The younger brother asks his father for his share of the inheritance. He heads off to Las Vegas, blows every last dime on slot machines, burlesque shows, and high living. Broke and desperate he gets himself a job on a pig farm in Arkansas, where the wage is so low he ends up eating pig food just to survive. With nothing to lose, he comes home and begs his dad’s forgiveness. His dad throws a big party, welcoming him back. The eldest son is outraged, pointing out to his dad how faithful and dedicated he has been. He sees absolutely no reason to cut someone slack who has been so irresponsible, thoughtless, self-serving and then comes waltzing back, hoping to make everything right. He wants nothing to do with his younger brother or his father’s forgiving and charitable spirit.

The eldest son would have loved our Gospel lesson today. This is exactly how he thinks the situation with his younger brother should have ended. Ten bridesmaids are waiting for the bridegroom in order to accompany the bridegroom to the wedding feast. Five of the bridesmaids are fully prepared for the possibility that the bridegroom may be delayed. When they grabbed their lamps, they also grabbed an extra flask of oil. The other five bridesmaids have made no such preparation. They just grabbed their lamps, without even checking to see how much oil was left, much less bring an extra flask of oil. The bridegroom is delayed. Just as the bridegroom can be seen coming up the High Bridge, the five who grabbed their lamps without checking, realize they are out of oil. They ask the ones who are prepared if they can borrow some from them. But, those who are prepared say “No. We don’t have enough for you and us. Go over to Super America and buy your own”. Unfortunately, while they are fumbling around for their credit card, the bridegroom comes and goes, accompanied by the five who had extra oil. The five who go to get oil from Super America high tail it over to Cherokee Park United. But, when they arrive, the doors are not only closed, but locked. They knock on the door, and the “Bridegroom yells out, next time, be prepared.” End of story. This is exactly what the eldest son thinks should have happened to his irresponsible, prodigal, younger brother. Close the door. You made your choices, now live with them.

The problem for the eldest son and anyone wishing to close the door on compassion and mercy is we still have the father who welcomes back the prodigal, with open arms, full of grace, love and forgiveness. We still have Jesus saying things like forgive someone 70 X 7 times than you are talking about forgiveness. Or don’t worry about the spec in your neighbor’s eye, when you have a log in your own. And, of course, love your neighbor as yourself. If the story about the bridesmaids is not a story of judgment, about people getting what they deserve, then what is this story Jesus tells, all about?

To begin with Jesus does let us know this story has to do with “what the Kingdom of Heaven will be like.” A wedding feast, a wedding celebration is a frequent image and metaphor for the Realm of God’s justice and love entering our world. Second, this story is about another major metaphor for the presence of God in our world and lives, which is the image of light. John’s Gospel puts it most succinctly when speaking about Jesus he says, “in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” This story has something to do with the Wedding Feast, the banquet of God’s justice and love and this story has something to do with how the light of God’s presence enters our world. The two are very much related.

I doubt it’s coincidental that there are two groups of bridesmaids, five who are prepared with oil for their lamps and five who are unprepared. Jesus after all calls us into community and the question is what type of community will we be? Will we be a community that is prepared, that keeps its flame alive? Or will we be a community who when the time comes to make a difference, to share the love and justice of God, find ourselves down at Super America, stumbling around for our credit cards, while the opportunity to let the light of God’s love shines, comes and goes?

One of the challenges not uncommon to communities of faith is having the capacity to say no. Because we hold firm to the story of the prodigal son, because we lay claim to the mercy and compassion of God, we feel it would be unchristian, unfaithful to say no anyone. But, that is precisely what this story is about. It is about saying no to all those things that get in the way of letting the light of God’s love shine. It is saying no to those behaviors, those attitudes that keep us separated from the wedding feast of God’s love and justice.

Sometimes in order to let our light shine as a community of faith we need to say no. The Presbyterian Church U.S.A has an entire section in its book of order devoted to what it calls “discipline.” Presbyterian polity, Presbyterian structure, is born out of the recognition that we are broken human beings, all of us are capable of acting badly. There are times when the church, if it is to let its light shine, must be able to say, no to those actions and behavior within the church that stand in the way of God’s love.

Last week I learned that there will be another clergy in my family. My niece informed me that a friend of hers had asked her if she would officiate at her friends. My niece said yes, so she is going on line to sign up for some type of internet certificate that makes her an official clergy of whatever denomination it is that exists in the Cloud. The thought went through my mind, “I hope you never end up with a surgeon who got his medical certificate that way”. But if our Gospel lesson today is a guide, Jesus is less concerned about people outside of the church pretending to be the church than he is about people inside of the church pretending to be the church.

The five bridesmaids who say no are saying no to anything that leaves our lamps half full, unprepared to let our lights shine. They are saying no to merely repeating the Lord’s Prayer while ignoring the depth and power of that prayer for our lives and world. The five brides maids are saying no to formulations of doctrine or belief that negate the compassion, justice and love of God. We can say no to faith speaking superficially about God’s love, while ignoring the racial realities and injustice that is all around us. They are saying no to faith that makes an idol out of the Bible, worshiping it, rather than the One who comes to us as the light of God. The prophet Amos would have made a good bridesmaid. He offers a resounding no to worship that sings praises to God, while ignoring the love and justice of God.

But, saying no is only part of what this story is about. More importantly, Jesus tells this story of the bridesmaids so that we can be a community of faith prepared and ready to say yes, letting our light shine. When someone new comes into our congregation, we can say in word and in deed, “yes, you are welcome here,” because we are living as a community where the light of love shines through. We say yes every time we witnesses to God’s banquet of love and justice. It may be Loaves and Fishes, Building Blocks Tutorial, supporting our Dakota brothers and sister, bringing food to a member just out of the hospital, but when the time comes, we give witness to the Realm of God through when we are prepared to say yes. The prophet Amos tells us that this is the yes God desires “to let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”.

The Wedding Feast awaits us. You are invited. We are all invited. The question for us and every community of faith is, are we prepared to let our light shine?

**Amos 5:18-24**

*In our first lesson the prophet Amos speaks to people who believe God is on their side. They are eager for the day of God’s judgment because they are confident God will judge those they consider enemies. Amos tells them the songs of praise they offer to God are not the things that put you on God’s side. The only thing that makes us right with God is letting God’s love and justice be reflected in our lives.*

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light and gloom with no brightness in it? I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,  
I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.  
  
**Matthew 25:1-13**

*In our second lesson Jesus compares the Kingdom of to ten bridesmaids. Five are prepared to share in the Banquet of God’s love and five others, never take the time and as a result miss the opportunity that comes their way.*

[Jesus said:] "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."