Sunday, November 8, 2026
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27A)
Matthew 25.1-13
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

"Don't Let the Light Go Out!"

When I was growing up in the 1960s and 70s, the favorite music genre in the Fincher household was folk music. Joan Baez, The Kingston Trio, The Limeliters, The Chad Michell Trio, just to name a few of our favorite performers. To this day, folk music is still my preferred, go-to genre. Partly because of nostalgia. Partly because some of the songs are joyful, even playful. But also, partly because many of the songs contain commentary regarding social justice, providing messages of encouragement and hope. Originally regarding what was going on in the 60s with civil rights, women's rights, anti-war sentiments, and the like. Messages that continue to be relevant today. Messages that have renewed relevance today.

One of our family's absolute favorite groups was Peter, Paul and Mary. We would listen to their records for hours in the evening or on weekend afternoons. They continue to be one of my absolute favorite folk groups, second only to Joan Baez. One Peter, Paul and Mary song that I find particularly moving was not one I grew up with. The song, "Light One Candle," was written by Peter Yarrow as a pacifist response to the 1982 Lebanon War. The song commemorates the struggle of the Maccabees, with themes of resilience, justice, freedom, and peace. The Maccabean revolt occurred between 167 and 160 BC, when the Jews revolted against the oppressive Seleucid Empire, ultimately leading to the recapture of Jerusalem and the rededication of the Second Temple. It was during the rededication of the Temple that the miracle of Hanukkah occurred. Even though there was only enough olive oil to keep the Temple's menorah candles burning for one day, the candles continued to burn for eight days. Symbolizing religious freedom, resistance to oppression and forced assimilation, and bringing light into darkness. Themes not limited to second century BC Palestine, but rather, themes that continue to be relevant today.

All of the verses of "Light One Candle" are moving and contain powerful messages of encouragement and hope. The first verse talking about the resilience of the Maccabees, with subsequent verses taking that example and message of resilience and applying it to us today and to our own struggles for social justice. But also, to my way of thinking, applying equally to our own personal struggles to faithfully live those same values. Values that are core to our Judeo-Christian faith tradition. And in between the verses is the refrain:

> Don't let the light go out!
> It's lasted for so many years.
> Don't let the light go out!
> Let it shine through our love and our tears.

This song, "Light One Candle," written nearly 2,000 years after the time of Jesus, commemorating an event that occurred 200 years before Jesus' Passion, provides an appropriate musical response to the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids we heard in today's Gospel reading.

Just to remind ourselves, the section of Matthew's Gospel we have been following for the last few weeks—and will continue navigating through the end of the liturgical year in two more weeks—is the account of Jesus' final days before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Since his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we know as Palm Sunday, Jesus has been preaching and teaching in the Temple. That is now over. Jesus and the disciples have left the city and are now on the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem. This is Jesus' last opportunity to give final teachings and instructions to his disciples before he is taken from them. Knowing that he will be leaving them—even if they are not able to grasp that reality—Jesus seeks to assure them that his departure is not the end. It is merely preparation for what is to come. For his Second Coming at the end of the ages, when he will usher in the fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven. He seeks to convey what this will be like, and what will be expected of them, through the use of a parable. Through a well-known cultural image they would have all been aware of, if not actually experienced themselves: a wedding.

Again, a little background to set the stage, since weddings in Jesus' time and culture were a bit different from our own. Just as in our time, the wedding was followed by a reception, a banquet, celebrating the newly married couple. It was customary following the wedding for the groom to go to the home of the bride and to take her to the groom's father's home, where the banquet would be held. A symbolic act of taking the bride from her old home into her new home; taking her into her new family. Part of the ritual involved was to have bridesmaids with lamps lighting the way to the groom's father's home, welcoming the couple to their new home and to their new life together. Once the couple arrived, all would go into the house and the banquet could begin.

What happens in the parable speaks for itself. Ten bridesmaids are tasked with greeting the happy couple and lighting their way to the reception. For whatever reason, the bride and groom are delayed. These things happen. When the bride and groom are finally ready to head to the reception, it is midnight. The lamps have been burning all evening and the oil is running low. Dangerously low. So low that there is not enough in the lamps to keep them burning for the trek to the reception. Luckily, five of the bridesmaids, foreseeing that sometimes delays occur, have planned ahead and brought extra oil. The other five? Well, they're just plain out of luck. They only brought what would be needed if everything went smoothly and according to plan—which they rarely do. The back and forth reveals that between the ten bridesmaids, there is only enough oil for five lamps, not ten. If the five who brought extra oil shared with the other five, there would not be enough for all ten to complete their duty. The only thing to do is for the five who have run out to try to obtain more. And as we heard, while they are off trying to find an oil store that is open after midnight, the groom and his bride come, the procession to the reception commences with five working lamps, and all is well. Except for the five who were not prepared. When they finally get to the reception, it is already in full-swing, and they are not granted entry.

In the context of the parable being an image for "the kingdom of heaven will be like this," the bridegroom is meant to symbolize the Messiah. Specifically, the return of the Messiah at the Second Coming. Now, it is possible that the fact that the bridegroom is delayed in the parable is a reference to the early Church's experience—and even the Church's current experience—of Jesus' ultimate return being "delayed." Or rather, the perception of delay. Immediately

following Jesus' death and resurrection, there was an expectation that he would return almost immediately. Which, we are obviously still waiting for. Or, perhaps Jesus was trying to prepare his followers for the fact that he may well be "delayed" from their perspective. That he would return in his own good time. When the time is right. And while we may not know the real reason for the delay, why the time is not yet right, perhaps it is reasonable to assume that it is not because of anything on Jesus' part, but it is on our part. Perhaps we still have work to do before his return.

Regardless, the important characters in the parable—the ones conveying the message Jesus' hearers are meant to receive—are the bridesmaids. The wise and the foolish bridesmaids representing two potential, and opposite, approaches to dealing with the uncertain and unknowable time of waiting for the bridegroom's coming. For the Messiah's return. Made all the more significant if the reason for the delay is because the bridesmaids—because WE—still have work to do. The parable thereby pointing to an ongoing way of being in the world as we continue to await the coming of the bridegroom, the Messiah. We can continue to be vigilant, to stay awake and attentive; or we can slack off and pursue our own interests, be distracted by other concerns. As we are told at the end of the parable, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

How we do that is exemplified by comparison between the wise and foolish bridesmaids. It is clear that the purpose of the bridesmaids while they wait for the arrival of the bridegroom—that our purpose while we await the return of the Messiah—is to continue to be lights shining in the darkness. The imagery in the parable cannot be more obvious. To continue to shine the light of the Gospel, to shine the light of Christ, in the darkness of the world around us. In order to do that, we need to remain awake and attentive, not only to watch for the coming of our Lord, but also to remain awake and attentive to what is going on around us. A time of waiting characterized by wisdom, preparation, and mindfulness. By which we discern where Christ's light needs to be shone in the world around us. What circumstances, which events, shrouded in darkness need to be exposed by the lights we carry in his name? And then being willing to boldly proclaim the Gospel and to work for its fulfillment. To boldly shine our lights in preparation for his coming.

It is easy to look at the parable and see a sort of "us and them" situation. The wise bridesmaids vs the foolish bridesmaids. And where there are certainly those who have more foresight, who are more inclined to think ahead and to be prepared, and those who are more haphazard, more fly-by-the-seat-of-their pants approach, perhaps this is not what Jesus is trying to convey. I don't think Jesus is trying to create unnecessary and unhelpful divisions among his people. Perhaps it is best to not think of this as a story about wise persons vs foolish persons, but rather as two sides of ourselves. The wise and the foolish sides that we all carry within ourselves; that are sometimes in contention. Sometimes our inner wisdom prevailing, and sometimes our inner foolishness prevailing. After all, all we truly have control over in such situations is ourselves. Not what others do. Not how others prepare. Not that others stay awake. Just what we do. Just how we prepare. Just how we respond. Just how we stay awake.

Ultimately, it is our own inner wisdom, our own wise actions, that help prepare us for the coming of the kingdom of heaven. It is our own inner wisdom, our own wise actions, that allow us to most fully participate in the kingdom of heaven. That allows us to take part in God's

mission and ministry here and now, and the opportunity to celebrate our relationship with God now and in the age to come.

As we strive to stay awake, let us remember:

Don't let the light go out!
It's lasted for so many years.
Don't let the light go out!
Let it shine through our love and our tears.

Don't let the light go out!