This past Sunday I was reacquainted with one of the joys of cold weather, which I love, and the business suit, about which I have considerably less warm feelings. I put on one of my favorite suits at home and by the time I reached the church, the reality of static cling had raised the hem of my wool trousers from the heel of my shoes to somewhere around my knees. My floors at home are hardwood, but here at the church the floors are carpeted and as I continued into the sanctuary, it dawned on me that I needed to do something, not merely to avoid the appearance of the fashion faux-pas of improperly tailored pants, but to avoid electrocuting myself or others with my now thoroughly electrically charged person if not personality.

And so, with great fear of spending the subsequent couple of hours using the heel of one foot to slide the cuff of my pants down the other ankle, I began to look around for what might do the job. And just as I was despairing of my quest, whom should cross my path but Melinda!

Recognizing a long-shot when I see one, I thought to myself, “Well, it’s possible…”

“Melinda, by any chance would the church have a can of anti-static cling spray?”

And to my astonishment, our ever-ready Melinda replied, “It’s possible. I think that is one of the things I keep on hand.”

Five minutes later I was in my office spritzing my pants with anti-static spray and giving thanks to God for small blessings. I mean, really, who keeps anti-static spray on hand at the office? (Other than me. I am now the proud owner of a can of it. If you are similarly afflicted, it’s in my closet on the shelf above my Geneva robes.)
Something about the parable of the bridesmaids put me in mind of this – who, after all, is always prepared?

This story strikes me as a bit harsh. Perhaps it does you? To our modern sensibilities, there are all kinds of things wrong with this story! First off, there are ten bridesmaids. Any wedding planner will tell you that if you can pull off a wedding with ten attendants, all on time, all prepared, you’ve accomplished something! Then there is the whole matter of waiting for the groom – that’s completely unlike what we do now. I’m not sure when the cultural shift happened, but the groom now waits on the bride, I’m sure you’ve noticed. And generally speaking, if the groom is after midnight getting to the church, it is generally accepted wisdom that your biggest drama isn’t going to be centered on the fact that the lights went out!

Taken as it is, there is no question but that this is a seriously odd story. Or at least so it seems to me. And if it seems odd to you too, well, count yourself consistent with the history of interpretation on this parable. The early church thought so too. It has been accepted for a very long time that this story is an allegory. The characters and actions are meant to have symbolic meaning. And some of the meaning can quickly be teased out just by thinking back on the Bible.

If we look back in our history, back into the history of Israel, we remember that the prophets often portrayed Israel as a bride and Yahweh, the God of Israel as a bridegroom. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hosea each in turn present God as the bridegroom for a sometimes faithless bride whom God pursues regardless. And so knowing that God is acting in Jesus, the bridegroom, then, is Jesus Christ.
And from the pages of the Gospel, we know that Jesus has been talking at great length about the kingdom of heaven and indeed he identifies the kingdom of heaven as being like a wedding feast. So it doesn’t take a huge logical leap to identify two key players in the story. They’re easy enough to understand.

But then there is the matter of those bridesmaids!

To be perfectly honest, the whole thing seems completely unfair. Who, when they retrieve their flashlight from the closet in order to wait for an errant bridegroom, already a problematic statement, reaches in the back recesses and grabs a couple extra d-cells?

It is one thing to underscore the importance of being prepared, but it is another thing altogether to set the expectations of preparedness far above what one would reasonably expect.

One of the congregations that I have served had a nuclear fall-out shelter in its sub-basement. I never actually saw them, but I was told that this particular congregation also found itself to be the owners of several hundred plastic disposable toilet seats to be used in the event that the fall-out shelter was ever occupied. It always struck me as a bit odd that in the event of nuclear holocaust that the congregation was prepared to keep its chemical toilets sanitary.

Something about the requirement for extra oil in the event of a tardy bridegroom strikes me as being on the same level.

And that is when it is perhaps the most helpful to remember that this story is an allegory. The oil and the lamps represent something.
As I was reading this past week, each of the scholars that I consulted agreed that the oil in question represents good works, good deeds.¹

Oil was prized in the ancient near east. Think of it, with what is one anointed? Oil is like lotion, moisturizing dry feet and faces after a dusty day. What is burned to make light? What did the widow use to make her oatcake for Elijah? Oil. Indeed the rabbinical tradition speaks of good deeds as oil. And in Jesus’ sermon on the mount we are urged to be the salt of the earth, to live our lives as lamps shining for others, and the oil, or the good deeds, are the fuel that makes our lives shine.²

So, at the outset, an allegorical interpretation appears to take the thorny theological problems of this text and put them nicely to bed.

Except that it doesn’t. There is that matter of the closed door and the disavowal.

We could make peace with this text if the bridesmaid’s whose oil burnt out simply went out to the market, replenished their supply and came back and joined the party. We could all rest moderately easy with the seeming silliness of bridesmaids feeling bad about their batteries running out with a groom who shows up after dark. We could even gloss over the uncharitable behavior of the so called wise maidens who wouldn’t share their oil with their allegedly foolish counterparts if it weren’t for the closed door and the haunting words, “I do not know you.”

That smacks of judgment. And through the years I have come to the anecdotal observation that if there is one thing that the liberal mainline church wants to avoid it is judgment.

¹ Thomas Long, Eduoard Schweizer and Stanley Hauerwas
Now I know there are many of you who don’t want to hear about judgment. You’ve told me. Some of you have told me horror stories about the judgment you have felt lobbed at you down through the years and how finding a place of grace such as Morningside was transformative in your life of faith. And one of you has told me that you spent years fleeing the so called book of judgment only to be horrified when a trusted preacher mentioned in a sermon that we don’t escape judgment and the book was back! You know the line, “you can run, but you can’t hide…”

There’s a big difference between judgmentalism and judgment, though.

We all know judgmentalism when we hear it and frankly, are right to resist it. Jesus approves of us resisting judgmentalism. Indeed he even commands it.

But we speak of Christ’s judgment of us every time we recite the Apostles’ Creed and say he will come again to judge the quick (that just means living) and the dead. And if you couple a creedal statement such as that with a cryptic story such as this, you have a recipe for a stampede for the door in a church such as ours, such as any mainline church. We aren’t so crazy about judgment and yet we can’t escape the fact the Bible mentions and it mentions it often.

I have a hunch if we’re running from judgment, it’s because we think of it as a great big scale, like the one blind Justice holds, with our good and our bad deeds on each side weighing our lives to see what the balance holds. And perhaps, at a gut level, we wonder if maybe all this reformed talk about grace and love are off the mark and what we do really does make the difference between life and death. And maybe we wonder if we really should’ve been keeping out own ledger after all, just in case Jesus’ accounting department missed a few credits.
That may sound absurd, but I promise you that you know somebody who thinks of their faith that way. I promise you someone you know is carrying around that awful burden. That’s just wrong. I can’t say it any more simply. That’s just wrong. That’s not what the Bible means by judgment.

So before we go a single step further, let’s remind ourselves of what the Bible means by judgment. It means making things right.

So if we think of judgment as a good God making things right, I think we can go on.

Once more, a little biblical scholarship will stand us in good stead as we seek to make sense of this parable. This parable, along with parable of the talents, from which I will preach next week, stand in the midst of a series of stories intended to make us think about the coming of Christ. Liturgically, the lectionary puts them here in the wind-down of the liturgical year to get us ready for Advent. In the narrative structure of the Gospel, they are pointing us to the second coming.

Matthew’s audience would have been looking for a second coming. They thought it might happen next week… or after breakfast… or during fellowship hour. Theirs was a community that believed the end times was upon them and soon.

We’ve had a little longer to think about it than Matthew’s audience though. There’s just something about close to a couple of thousand years elapsing that tends to dampen our eschatological zeal.

Despite the efforts of doomsday predictors, I’m pretty sure you’re not expecting Jesus to come before the workday tomorrow. I will set my alarm clock, I don’t know about you.
Even our most recent, most famous end-times predictor officially retired from the
prognostication business last week when it turned out the second coming was not, in fact,
delayed for six months.

My first introduction to eschatological zeal was when I had a classmate who genuinely
believed that Jesus would come back during our lifetimes. She asked me one day, “Don’t
you think it’ll be soon?”

We were preparing for finals. I replied, “preferably before the exam.”

I’m reminded of Fred Craddock’s wonderful story about a baseball teammate who was
eagerly awaiting the second coming and called to him from across the field one day
during a game, “Fred, wouldn’t it be great if Jesus came back right now.” Surveying the
score and the prowess of the other team, Craddock replied, “I can’t think of a better
time!”

I’m not sure we’re really sitting around waiting for the judgment. I’m not sure we’re
really sitting around waiting for God to make things right, are we?

Are we?

Is there something you yearn for God to make right? Maybe so, maybe so. If you came
here looking for a place of grace, maybe there’s something that needs to be made right
for you?

Waiting for things to be made right can be an awfully long wait.

Waiting for things to be made right, don’t we need some directions on what to do in the
meantime?

That’s where the bridesmaids come back in. That oil, those good works, that fills our
lamps, don’t we need it to be a deep reservoir when we’re waiting for something to be
made right? That’s why the kingdom seemed so far off for those so called foolish bridesmaids. When you need the oil to keep going, you need it right then!

We need a deep reservoir to keep our lamps burning when the night gets long.

That is what growing in the lift of faith does. It deepens our reservoirs so that we can withstand the night.

The word in the New Testament that is associated with the coming of Jesus is the Greek word *parousia*. It means presence or showing. We need a deep reservoir to carry us until the showing of Jesus.

There’s a long debate about what the coming of Jesus will look like, whether it’s literal or figurative. We’ll talk more about that in a few weeks. In the meantime, the lesson for us from this seemingly perverse parable is that we need a deep reservoir to carry us until the bridegroom shows up. When you need your reservoir to be full, it matters whether you’ve built up your oil. My point: life is sometimes tough. Build your reservoir. Fill it. Let the lamp shine for others.

I hope maybe this has shed some light on this parable. If not, let me close with a story that may. Let me tell you about my friend Betty James.

Betty died not too long ago. She was remarkable. I met her at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis. When I knew her she was in her mid-nineties. She was a character. She played the piano in the 1930’s for a silent movie theater. She was the sort of lady who would have a young minister over for lunch to inform him of woman in the congregation who had designs on him that she thought he ought to know about. She was blind, twice widowed, and a multi-occurrence cancer survivor. She had probably the most positive outlook on life I’ve even known despite having endured tremendous
hardship. I was talking about her to my boss Bill one day, marveling at her incredible outlook on life, musing that I’m not sure my faith would carry me the way hers’ had, where I similarly challenged. After I went on a while, Bill looked at me and said, “You realize of course, that she works very hard at that.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.