**Prepared with Kingdom Values**

November 12, 2023 Pentecost 24

Over the past years, we have been witnessing a crisis in houselessness. It has become more prevalent following the city councils’ refusal to put the amount needed to end houselessness in the budget after unanimously promising to do so months before. Since then, we have seen continued deaths by toxic drug poisonings, terrible cases of frostbite, insufficient shelter spaces and warming spaces open up, a tent city that created community and then was forcibly and violently dismantled, smaller encampments emerge in various locations throughout the city, and Knox Met United Church putting up a fence to keep out the houseless, to protect their property. The unhoused are being shut out of our city. I know from past experience working with the unhoused that they often feel anonymous, unrecognized, and non-human, because of the way they are treated. They are shut out, as if we don’t know them.

The five bridesmaid’s in today’s gospel reading might have felt similar as they were shut out of the wedding celebration. This story about the ten bridesmaids, or young women who were often assumed to be virgins, follows Jesus’ message and warnings about the end times and the coming of the Son of Humanity, the so called second coming. Jesus is clear that no one knows when this time will be, including him, yet too many Christians have spent too much time trying to determine the time, or focusing on it coming soon. We then read todays parable which Jesus is said to have told about the ten bridesmaids as a warning about being ready, being prepared for we do not know the day or hour when Jesus will come. It helps to understand what the wedding traditions may have been that the bridesmaids are a part of. Thomas Boomershine of the Storytelling Commentary provides the following background:

While the exact character of wedding celebrations in 1st century Palestine is unknown and may well have varied in different villages and regions, there are traditional wedding practices in Arab countries that correspond with the wedding celebration in Jesus’ parable. The bride and her bridesmaids gather at the bride’s father’s house in the evening and the groom’s party at his father’s house. The negotiations for the bride’s endowment continue throughout the evening between the fathers of the bride and groom.

Sometime around midnight in a blaze of lamplight, the bridegroom arrives at the bride’s house with his company to pick up the bride and take her to his home to become part of his family. With lamps lit, the bride and her bridesmaids and the groom with his friends walk in a grand procession to the groom’s home for the wedding ceremony and banquet.

Everybody would catch some sleep in the afternoon and evening of the wedding so they could stay awake late into the early morning hours for the celebration. Weddings were the greatest celebrations of the year in the villages of Galilee. To make a mistake or miss a wedding was a major grief and loss. It is also probable that the stores in a village would stay open to sell items to the guests who would come for the wedding.

So, the bridesmaids were waiting for the groom to come to the bride’s house so they could light the procession of the couple to his house. Thus, having oil for their lamps was important. It was a long wait and five of the women did not have extra oil. The other women would not share, so in going out to get some the so called foolish bridesmaids are locked out and told by the Lord, the groom, that he doesn’t know them. Once again, we have a parable, a story that seems harsh. Where is the grace? Where is the love? Where is the compassion?

Indeed, there are some scholars who say this is likely not a parable of Jesus, that it was created by Matthew to address the concerns of the community that Jesus hadn’t returned yet, and to encourage them, to always be prepared and ready for Jesus’ coming because we don’t know when it will be. David Ewart of Holy Textures indicates that this "parable" has several striking dis-similarities with Jesus' other parables:

* it does not cut against social or religious expectations;
* it does not surprise or shock his first listeners - instead it would confirm their conventional wisdom that the foolish are punished and the prepared are rewarded;
* there is no unexpected twist in the story;
* the story lacks humour, paradox, new insight;
* it is unimaginative and easy to figure out what "the moral" is.
* it concludes with a closed, impenetrable boundary - clearly separated insiders from outsiders.

What would make this parable more fitting with Jesus’ message?

What if the bridesmaid’s with extra oil shared? What would be more wise? Hoarding the extra you have, or believing there is enough for all and sharing what you have. Their reasoning for not sharing was that there would not be enough. That sounds like empire/capitalist type thinking. How much oil would be needed for a short walk to the grooms’ house? If there really wouldn’t be enough, then what would happen if they shared a lamp? There would still be enough light. Jesus’ message would be one of sharing and inclusion, all would be welcome into the wedding party. We don’t know the circumstances of the bridesmaids who didn’t have extra oil. Maybe they reflect those without privilege, who didn’t have the resources for extra oil. Maybe they all were distracted by secondary concerns of needing the oil. Maybe they needed to be focused on welcoming and accompanying the bridegroom. Maybe the so called wise bridesmaids are distracted by empire values, of greed, selfishness, and individualism. These are not kingdom values. These are not Jesus’ values. With Jesus and the kingdom he preached, there is always enough. Enough loaves and fishes, enough wages, enough love and forgiveness, enough compassion.

A key purpose in sharing this parable for Matthew is the message of being awake and prepared for Jesus’ coming, for we do not know the day or the hour. How might Jesus’ want us to prepare or be prepared?. I think Jesus would want us to be prepared by living out God’s will, living toward the kingdom here and now. By working to create a community of love and compassion, one that is generous and just, where there is enough for all, where together we can live where all have enough, and we support those who are distracted by empire living to do the same.

As winter approaches, and with the lack of sufficient shelter spaces, warming spaces and affordable housing for the unhoused, there is great potential for people to be suffering out in the cold. We do not want them to be shut out. There is a coalition that we are involved with, of churches, front line agencies and volunteers, who are working to establish a warming centre for the unhoused in downtown Regina. Carmichael outreach has offered space and worked out a budget of $500,000 to staff an 8 hour shift, 7 days a week, supplemented by volunteers. We are working toward a meeting with the Minister of Social Services to ask for the funding as this is a crisis they need to address. Your letters of support will be welcome when we are ready. There is enough, and with our shared resources we can provide a warm welcome to people on the street, so they are not shut out or left out in the cold again. This is a temporary measure as we will continue to pressure the governments to step up and fund ending houselessness. As we work with this program and the people in need, may we see Christ in them, that they may feel known and loved. This is our calling to live out the kingdom and being prepared.

May we remember that there is enough, that we are enough, and share the resources we have, to build the kingdom. May we not be distracted by the ways of this world, so we can focus on the kingdom values that Jesus taught. May we be prepared for Christ’s coming by living kingdom values and seeing the Christ in those we meet and work and live with.