

“The Wise Maidens”

Matthew 25:1-13

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One of my favorite musicals is *The Music Man*. And my favorite scene is when the whole cast sings, “The Wells Fargo wagon is a comin’ down the street, what will it bring for me?” As we listen to that song, we can feel the power of expectation. We can see the neighbors standing on the sidewalk, peering out the windows, all anticipating the arrival of a delivery that will surely bring some joy to their lives! It seems that everyone in the entire town is out there, full of anticipation.

The Music Man came to me as I was reading through the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens. We wouldn’t want to be asleep when the Wells Fargo wagon comes to town! Nor would we want to be unconscious when the Holy Spirit moves among us calling us into discipleship, calling us into ministry and mission, calling us to be a light in a world where darkness persists.

In the parable, there are five bridesmaids who are just unconscious, oblivious to the moving of the Spirit. I think of these five as churches who close their doors and shutter their windows to the world outside. They are churches paralyzed by the fear of getting involved in the work of loving the neighbor, in the work of establishing justice, in the work of bringing abundance of grace where there is a poverty of grace.

I think of the five bridesmaids who have filled their lamps with oil as churches who are poised to respond when the Spirit moves, when the Spirit says, “I have a mission to place in your hands.”

These are the churches I think of as the movers and the shakers. Thirty four years ago, I found myself reading a number of local church profiles, hoping to find a church that was like one of those bridesmaids whose lamps were full of oil. I found one. It's called the Congregational Church in South Glastonbury! I read this church's profile from beginning to end. I saw that South Church is alive to missions in Hartford and in the whole world. I saw that this church had a sister congregation on the corner of Albany and Vine Streets in the north end of Hartford. I saw this church cared deeply about mental health. There was plenty of evidence that I had found a church that kept its wick trimmed and burning. One way I have tried to understand my ministry here is to be one among you who keeps the lamp full of oil, who tries to remain conscious of the Spirit moving among us.

Indeed, South Church is and always will be a congregation who opens itself to the world, who opens itself to the pain of its neighbors, who opens itself to the moving of the Spirit. One of the memories I will always carry with me is the faith statement written by Marc Feldmann in his Confirmation year. It is engraved on his tombstone in Old Church Cemetery. It's all about the Holy Spirit. Marc wrote, **"The Holy Spirit is the feeling of hurt I receive when I see something wrong and it is the action I feel I must take."** Marc was a South Church young man who kept his lamp filled with oil. He stood poised to respond to any injustice he witnessed.

When Jesus told this parable, he was giving the community a hint as to the quality of life God hopes for within the human family. The Kingdom of God becomes real and noticeable in our midst, when we allow ourselves to feel the pain of the world. Marc was an awesome witness to this truth. I am touched that his faith statement lives on. If you haven't visited his grave, please do so.

It's at the far, west end of Old Church cemetery. You can't miss it because his entire faith statement is engraved upon the stone.

I have shared his statement with every succeeding Confirmation class. Marc's statement is but one sign of a congregation that keeps its lamp trimmed and burning.

I feel badly for the five bridesmaids who fell asleep, who let the oil in their lamps burn out. I suppose we can all sympathize with those five because we've all had times in our lives when we've closed ourselves off from the world, when we've let our lamps burn out, when we've lost the energy for caring deeply.

The Good News is that the Holy Spirit never gives up on us. The Holy Spirit is like the wind. It keeps on blowing upon us, filling our souls with a desire to live as God hopes we'll live, renewing our energy for being truly open and affirming, rekindling our passion for mental health, rejuvenating our commitment to peace.

In my fantasy life, I imagine those five bridesmaids being first in line the next morning at the hardware store. They are there filling their lamps, becoming conscious, choosing life as God hopes it will be lived, becoming once again the church known for being a light in the community. In my fantasy, those five bridesmaids find their way into the next Confirmation class at South Church. And in that class, they are warmly welcomed by the other five. And the ten, together, become the kind of force for good that let us all know we're living in the greatest of hope. Amen.