

Matthew 25:1-13

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 the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, as 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."

Prayer.

Gracious God, there are things in our lives that need to die in order for our lives to bring forth a bumper crop of joy. Help us to see what blocks joy in our lives so that heaven won't feel so far away. Amen,

"When Heaven Seems Far Away"

"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

John 12:24

For years, the Jewish Christians in Matthew's church had gathered after observing the Shabbot to remember the Last Supper that the Apostles had eaten with Jesus, to tell their stories about what it was like to be disciples of Jesus, and to describe what it was like for them to be in the presence of the Risen Christ. Each time Matthew told his stories of faith, the worshipping congregation vicariously received some gift of comfort for some personal grief, a ray of hope in some hopeless situation, a touch of healing on a raw and open wound, the courage to love Jesus style, or healing from some enslaving sin. This kind of witness and mutual praying together was sufficient to keep the church members faithfully following in the footsteps of Jesus until one belief about Jesus Christ failed to come true. It was the belief that God would send Christ back victoriously to earth a second time to bring human history to a close. When Matthew's gospel was written around 80 A.D., the second coming of Jesus had not occurred. Faith faded. Hope diminished. Many believers found themselves battling a chronic spiritual dis-ease of forsaking Christ. The parable of the wise and foolish warns that when Christ comes again and doesn't find human beings engaging in the works of Jesus, Christ won't be able to engage with them in order to grant them some grace of God.

"Southern Gothic" is a new song by the recording artist, Tyminski. It echoes the Bible belt's religious, social, and individual failure to follow Jesus in the present while waiting on Christ's return.

Blackbird on the old church steeple
Spanish moss hanging in the setting sun
Every house has got a Bible and a loaded gun
We've got preachers and politicians

Round here its kinda hard to tell
Which one is gonna do more talking with a crooked tongue.
This towns' got the good lord shakin' his head
Lookin' down thinking we ain't heard a word he said.
A word he said.

Baptized in southern gothic
In the garden of good and evil
Devil right here who whould'a thought it
In a town of God fearin' people
Dogs and deadbolts guard the night
Nothing left to do but kneel and pray
We've got a church on every corner
So why does heaven feel so far away
Far away.

There must be something in the muddy water
Turns the whisky 'bout as sweet as sin
Every drunk in town can sing a brown bag hymn,
Good fences make good neighbors
But good neighbors make good lovers too
When your man ain't home any man will do.
High on homegrown, smokin' that brimstone
Momma ain't stoppin', poppin' that cotton'
No happy ever after, waitin' on the rapture now.

When we take a glance back at his gospel to see what forsaking Jesus meant to Matthew, we find: abstinence from bad behavior (15:19), forgiveness of others (5:44), love of other Christians (24:12), unhesitating faith (21:21), loyalty to Jesus (10:32), love for God (22:37), and love for enemies (5:44). But heaven is far away from us too. Today, our spiritual dis-ease of forsaking Jesus that pollutes our humanity and poisons our soul looks like racism, nationalism, ageism, classism, sexism, militarism, ego-centrism, bigotry, prejudice, economic injustice, violence, and the seven deadly sins.

There are many reasons why the Gothic South, followers of Jesus in Matthew church, and we forsake Jesus while waiting

on Christ's return. In his book 'A Grief Observed' C. S. Lewis suggests one in a story about his wife. Apparently, she was in the habit of shutting out God because she believed that God was only concerned with cleaning up her sin. He wrote: "Long ago, before we were married, (Joy) was haunted all one morning as she went about her work with the obscure sense of God (so to speak) at her elbow, demanding her attention. And of course, not being a perfected saint, she had the feeling that it would be a question, as it usually is, of some un-repentant sin or tedious duty. At last she gave in --- I know how one puts it off--- and faced Him. But the message was "I want to give you something," and instantly she entered joy." (Weavings, Unfailing Treasure, p. 11)

Often times Jesus gifts come through our relationships with other people. Rev. Ron Buford wrote: "A friend complained about his mom, a wealthy woman who by inheritance wanted for nothing . . . but was miserable. "It's a living hell" was her constant refrain while shaking her downcast head when even life's smallest routine things went wrong. This so bothered my friend that their time together was difficult. Dressed up and driving to a fabulous party with the same friend one evening, we caught every green light just right, sailing as if on a magic carpet. Finally, a red light stopped our flying. I turned, looked at my well-dressed friend and passenger and with mocking tone and gesture said, "It's a living hell." Doubled over with laughter, we pulled over and rolled out of the car. From that day forward, when minor things went wrong, in unison we'd say, "It's a living hell . . . and laugh. The phrase helped us see the relative ridiculousness of our angst, swimming on lakes of privilege. It also helped my friend suspend judgment with his mom. Anticipating his mom's phrase, laughing, he began to say it for her, "I know mom, it's a living hell." And then one day, instead of saying it, his mom actually laughed at herself. My friend let his old adolescent relationship with his mom die. A new adult peer to peer relationship was born. Both son and mom were set free. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

(UCC Daily Devotional, "It's about time" 10/30/17)