Lead Humbly: Preparing for the Wait
Matthew 25:1-13
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Jesus tells a story about waiting. To enter into the surprise and wonder of this parable, we need to know something about weddings in Jesus' time.

Weddings were significant celebrations, involving considerable time, resources, and hope. Though we don't have all the details, many historians have hypothesized that guests gathered at the bride's home and waited for the bridegroom. When he approached, the bridesmaids and other guests would light their torches and join a festive procession to his home, where the ceremony and banquet would follow. For a tight knit village, such occasions drew the whole community together and everyone wanted to be part of the celebration.

So in Jesus' parable, ten young women wait for the bridegroom. They all have lamps. They all expect the wedding to take place. They all begin with the same anticipation. But there's a twist…. the bridegroom is delayed.

As the hours pass, all ten become tired and fall asleep. Even the wise bridesmaids fall asleep. Jesus is not asking for superhuman vigilance or a constant state of anxiety. The difference between the two groups is simple: five have brought extra oil for their lamps, and five have not.

When the announcement finally comes that the bridegroom is approaching, the foolish bridesmaids discover that their lamps are going out. They have not prepared for the possibility of a long wait.

They ask the others to share their oil, but there is not enough for everyone. While they go to buy more, the bridegroom arrives. The celebration begins, the door closes, and the opportunity to enter has passed.

Jesus concludes with a warning: "Keep watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." It is a challenging ending. But notice where the parable actually points - the bridesmaids do not provide the banquet. They do not make the wedding happen. The parable point us to the bridegroom - the one who brings the celebration. The responsibility of the young women is to be ready to join the groom when he comes - to take their place in the procession and enter the celebration.

The only difference Jesus reveals between the foolish and wise is that the wise bridesmaids are prepared to wait. As one commentary puts it, "Being merciful for an evening can be pleasant; being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires preparedness" and hope.

There is a difference between living faithfully when everything is going well and continuing to live faithfully when the waiting stretches on. There is a difference between seeking peace when it seems possible and working for peace when violence, division, and conflict seem to have the upper hand. There is a difference between stepping into leadership in a situation where

decisions need to be made, and sustaining humble leadership that doesn't amass power or eclipse the needs of others.

Over the last 3 Sundays, we have begun exploring a new statement about who we are and what we are up to at St. John's. "As followers of Jesus, together we worship deeply, equip disciples, lead humbly, and serve with grace and hope." From the view of the parable, there are some key insights into the phrase that we seek to lead humbly.

Perhaps first is that humble leadership recognizes that we are not the bridegroom. We are not the host of the banquet. We are guests. We do not control the future of the world, determine God's timetable, or possess all the answers. The church is not ours to own or control. We are people waiting for the return of Jesus - God's promised future, called to live faithfully in the meantime.

It also calls us to lead well. Lots of definitions of good leadership. The Leadership Challenge I studied in the Leadership Wood buffalo program focused on:

- Doing what we say we will do.
- Seeing and sharing exciting possibilities for the future.
- Empowering one another to take initiative and experiment.
- Fostering collaboration and building up others.
- Celebrating others and showing gratitude.

These healthy habits of leadership are needed for personal growth, for successful group projects at home, community, work and church. Placing "lead humbly" in our core statement of who we are and what we are up to puts attention on creating a supportive ecosystem for people to mature in healthy, humble leadership - like in the words of Nancy's book study - how we learn to be brave. Oil in the lamp as we await the full coming of God's kingdom.

On Remembrance Day, we remember that peace is not yet a reality. We remember families and communities devastated by war, and those who continue to live with its consequences. We remember because the work of peace is not finished. Freedom, justice, and compassion are fragile in the face of oppression, violence, and injustice.

Delay does not mean the promise of the Prince of Peace has been abandoned. Christian hope rests on the conviction that history has a purpose and a goal, and that God continues to love, redeem, and reconcile the world through Jesus Christ. This hope does not mean closing our eyes to suffering. It means facing the world as it is while trusting that the world as it is will not have the final word. Leading humbly by resisting hatred, seeking reconciliation, protecting the vulnerable, and building a world where peace is more than the absence of fighting. Living in hope means working for the world God promises, even when we cannot see when or how that promise will be fulfilled.

When the foolish bridesmaids discover their lamps are going out, they ask the wise bridesmaids to share their oil. The answer seems harsh. Isn't sharing what faithful people are supposed to

do? Perhaps Jesus is pointing to something that cannot simply be transferred from one person to another.

We can encourage one another in faith. We can pray for one another, teach one another, and remind one another of God's promises when hope is hard to find. But we cannot live someone else's life of faith for them. We cannot borrow another person's spiritual maturity at the last minute. We cannot wait until a crisis comes to begin cultivating the habits that sustain us through it. We lead humbly when we allow God to knit us into the tapestry of his people. Offering our gifts, experiences, and capabilities to help create a community where faith can be nurtured over time. We gather with others who are also waiting. We worship, learn, serve, and remind one another of God's promises. We practise the love and justice we trust will one day characterize the whole world.

There is also a warning in this parable that we must not overlook: the door closes. It is tempting to assume that there will always be another opportunity. We can apologize tomorrow, make peace another day, reach out to someone later, or stand up for someone when circumstances are easier. But tomorrow is not guaranteed.

The foolish bridesmaids assume a bright future without adequately preparing for it. Their failure is not that they lacked enthusiasm at the beginning. It is that they were not ready when the moment came. The parable reminds us that timing matters. There are relationships that need repair, neighbours experiencing loneliness or injustice, and opportunities to work for peace that require action today. To lead humbly is not to wait passively. It is to accept our responsibility while recognizing that the final outcome belongs to God.

This is why the Christian life holds together both patience and urgency. We hold together leadership and humility. We are patient because God's timing is not ours to control. We are urgent because love cannot always be postponed.

Finally, we remember who the main character is in this parable. It is not the wise bridesmaids or the foolish bridesmaids. It is the bridegroom. The story is not ultimately about how well we manage the future. It is about the One who comes and brings the celebration.

And so we wait, not in panic and not in complacency, but in hope. And we prepare oil - worship, discipleship, leadership, service, community. The bridegroom is coming. The banquet is being prepared. And the God who has promised to make all things new has not forgotten the world God loves.

May we keep our lamps burning, our hands ready to serve, and our hearts open to hope—until the day when the waiting ends, peace is made complete, and all God's people are gathered into the joy of the feast.