



**“AS THE WORLD BURNS”**  
**SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 25: 1-13**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**November 8, 2020**

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**Matthew 25:1-13**

25:1 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.

25:2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.

25:3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them;

25:4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

25:5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.

25:6 But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'

25:7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps.

25:8 The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'

25:9 But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.'

25:10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.

25:11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.'

25:12 But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'

25:13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The Word of the LORD

**Thanks be to God.**

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As the world burns in four parts.

**Part I: Controlled burn**

*(manure picture and MMS)*

It's been an intense week. So, let's cut the sh.... horse manure--yes that's a wheelbarrow full of horse manure. I spend part of every day scooping manure out of the paddock where my horses are at night.

And while I shovel I pray. I call them my sh... horse manure prayers. I pray for people going through a lot. I pray for people who have caused harm and are hard to love. I pray those who are hurting, for those who have been harmed.

I have been doing a lot of praying this week--a lot of praying.

And then I take the wheel barrow and dump it into a big pile of all those prayers for healing, for mercy, for a better way to emerge--into a pile that with time becomes beautiful, nourishing compost and fertilizer.

All that manure gathered up in prayer--somehow turned and turned to growing things that are more robust, more lush, sturdier, healthier... better!

*(back to just MMS)*

But if you use manure before it has had time to break down the way it needs to, that same manure can burn seeds and plants--it can cause more harm than good, it can cause languishing even death.

Faith is the capacity to give something time when that is what it needs to truly grow. Faith has patience--but patience that is wise to the ways God works.

The patience of faith is not passivity--but active, rooted, transformative. That manure doesn't just sit there doing nothing while it becomes something that can enrich the soil, it connects with air, water, soil, insects, temperature and engages in a process of transformation.

This week was not about hunkering down and holding our breath in America. It was about faith actively deployed to manifest transformation in waiting.

As the world burns can be a life-giving chain reaction when the conditions are ripe for things to grow!

**As the world burns, part II: Refiner's fire**

*(refiner's fire picture and MMS)*

There are lots of ways to change things--time, force, manipulation, encouragement, affirmation, correction.

The refiner's fire uses heat to create malleability--to make even the most rigid object able to bend and become something new.

But the heat is so intense that it can be hard to bear. 1600-1700 degrees clean and sterilize metal--refining them in their integrity. Not everything can abide in such heat--things like paper and wood are not refined, they are broken down into ash and dust.

*(Back to just MMS)*

The story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids is really two stories conflated into one. One story is a joyful story about women's inclusion in the kingdom of God--inclusion in defiance of patriarchal structures that saw women as property instead of people.

But the other story is a warning--to the community, and maybe particularly to women in the community.

The warning is about how you have to act to be included in the kingdom. We don't know exactly what the gospel writer's intended message was to women in his community. But it has something to do with some actions and behaviors being beyond the pale. That failure to be or to do certain things, or getting to those things too late had dire consequences. And the warning may have applied to a sizable portion of the community--half were wise, half were foolish.

Why take joy and conflate it with judgment? It's a curious teaching tool--and it can only work in a community that has a way to draw parallels to harm being done in that community.

There are lots of ways to read this story--some with a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion--that's an academic way of saying--when you've spent enough time as a women in a patriarchal culture, you know that you will never be liberated if you don't bring a healthy amount of suspicion to any correction story for women written by a man. Because those corrections can be more about teaching women to collude with our oppressor, than they really are about the kingdom of God.

Oppression is baked into the Christian faith. If mutual liberation is our goal then sometimes being wise is being foolish, and being foolish is being wise. If mutual liberation is our goal then sometimes we refuse the demands of the powerful to submit--and we give ourselves to a more elemental process of transformation that only the Spirit can engineer.

As the world burns, the Holy Spirit's fire can get turned up really, really high in order for things to be transformed. And not everyone is able to stand the heat.

The burner was turned on high this week in America--and the beautiful thing about the refiner's fire is how a bend can become more pronounced, a sharp edge can be smoothed, a stubborn stasis can give way to an interesting new twist.

This week in America was about a beleaguered democracy, bending into a stronger version of itself under extreme conditions.

The heat was coming from a lot of places--competing and conflicting places--trying to bend the power of the people. As the process unfolds, the democratic system that aspires to embody the will of the people is coming into its own in a way it never has.

We are not getting back to normal. We are claiming a revolutionary joy that can only come when we have clarified for ourselves who we are together.

Attorney and scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw, a Black leader and prophetess of mutual liberation said yesterday: "Today we celebrate, congratulate and appreciate. Tomorrow, we must fight--not against division but white supremacy, not against patriotism but fascism, not against difference but dominance. We can never make peace with any of Trumpism. Nor abandon those most harmed by it."

The wise and the foolish ways this country has engaged with the kind of power Donald Trump has dished out, not just these last four years, but his whole adult life, is a warning to us all. Our democracy is both fracturable and malleable.

These last four years will have been for naught, if any of us think we need to get back to "normal." We've been through the refiner's fire as a country--it's time for this country to bend to a new kind of integrity--that goes down into our chemical make-up, our history, our DNA. The path forward is to continue the work of dismantling white supremacy and speaking truth to power.

The new administration will need to be held accountable for what we have learned about ourselves--the healing of this nation is no small task. And healing isn't about restoring, it's about refining.

### **As the world burns, part III: It only takes a spark**

*(campfire picture and MMS)*

It only takes a spark to get a fire going--that was one of my favorite church camp songs. I sang it to my babies when I'd put them to bed. I sing it when I'm walking sometimes or riding my horse.

"That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it. It's fresh like spring, you want to sing, you want to pass it on."

That kind of spark catching fire can be beautiful--like people dancing in the street all over this country in Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Detroit.

But the dangerous thing about burning is that sparks can be lit for destruction just as quickly. So, we embrace the joy, and we stay watchful for the dangerous torch of hatred that has not been extinguished.

Being wise about where we are as a people means being awake and aware of the dangers we continue to face on this planet--climate change, systemic poverty, white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, greed, lack of health care, homelessness--these things are killing our bodies, our communities. These things are threatening our future.

And as people of faith, we must tend the fires of mutual liberation. And at the same time, we must not ignore the embers of hate still combustible, still gathering steam. While we tend the fires of liberation, we must also be about the work of extinguishing the rage generated by white supremacy. It is still burning, even as the spark of mutual liberation is shining brighter.

### **As the world burns, part IV: Burning hearts**

*(thumbnail Picture and MMS)*

How do we know mutual liberation when we see it?

How do we avoid the blinding lights of greed and nationalism and supremacy and dominance?

The wise and foolish bridesmaids, in all their complexity, do shine forth with a truth that needs to be spoken for us to all be free.

Some came better equipped than others, some were more ready than others--but one thing that can be easy to miss about this story is that they all had the desire to be there for a marriage celebration--the joining together of families and fortunes, the consecrating of a shared future and the joy of knowing we are becoming one family out of two.

Keeping our lamps trimmed and burning is more about desire than it is about being deserving. The message behind Matthew's corrective may be lost on us, but the dreams of faithful people waiting for a better world that seems like it is taking so long to get here--well we know what that feels like.

And the desire to see that day come--that is the fire that is burning within us a little bit brighter today. Because that desire is fueled by belief, by hope, but most of all by a revolutionary love that knows how to watch and knows how to wait, but that revolutionary love also knows how to work.

And work fueled by the burning desire for God's creation healed--well that is the work we will do.

Thanks be to God.