

Vision Unlimited – sermon for Nov. 12, 2023 (Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids)
by Felicia Urbanski

PLEASE NOTE:

I wrote this sermon before a member of Melville United told me that the column in the Wellington paper was not referring to the Melville church building, but rather to St. John's Anglican Church in Elora. So...read with this in mind! I feel that the column could still refer to "church" in general – a longing for connection to a long-ago past for anyone who has not been to church in quite a while, and our longing (as church-goers) to share the Spirit's incredible power to transform through acting upon our beliefs. ~ *Felicia*

Probably most all of you receive or pick up the *Wellington Advertiser*, and this week what caught my eye was another wonderful weekly column written by Kelly Waterhouse, appropriately called "Write Out of Her Mind". Who here reads that column?... Don't you love the way she refers to her husband as "the Carpenter"?...I find her writing to be so humorous and yet very meaningful.

Several years ago, I found her Remembrance Day column to be absolutely excellent, and I cut it out and saved it in order to quote her sometime in the future. I was even thinking of using some of her words last week, as we had our Remembrance service here at Melville. But as it turned out, I had quite a bit of thoughts that I wanted to share with you in my reflection, and we had a lot going on in that worship service. We were graced by the opportunity to hear a trumpeter, a bagpiper, and sing together "The White Cliffs of Dover", along with several other hymns and Colleen's beautiful rendition of songs like "Let There Be Peace on Earth".

But Kelly Waterhouse's column which came out this past Thursday, November 9th, had something surprising and extraordinary about it. Did you happen to notice it?...

Her title is "Open", and she shares a story about a church which says it is "open for prayer". Could this be Melville? Here's what she writes:

"I can't tell you how long it's been since I walked through the door of the church I was christened in, but when I saw the sign outside saying "Open for Prayer", it was an invitation I felt called to accept.

I'd been standing outside in the cool November afternoon, photographing the Poppy Project display of hand crocheted poppies strewn together, draping from the sides of the historic steeple down to the leaf-covered lawn. I take this photo every year. It's one of the personal ways I mark the coming of Remembrance Day."

Well! Who knew that Melville would get free publicity in the local newspaper? Now I feel like writing to Kelly, or writing a letter to the editor – to thank her for describing what this

experience was like for her, and how the rest of her column, as always, had meaningful things to say about the act of remembrance. She concludes her column by saying:

“Alone in that sacred space it felt foreign, yet familiar. Safe. Time well spent. I placed money in the coffers, gladly, leaving lighter in spirit. Money well spent.

Faith, like remembrance, is a deeply personal experience. I’m grateful for the open invitation. And I’m thankful for the solitude in a noisy world. Keeping the faith. Lest we forget.”

Hmm. In my letter to Kelly, or to the paper’s editor, I would say something about what the Melville community of faith is doing these days – in the here and now. Besides providing an open invitation to come inside and pray, and providing “solitude in a noisy world” as she says, there is a *lot* more going on. A lot of positive things!

But before we look at these positive things, I want to tie this in to the Gospel reading today. Matthew’s Gospel gives us Jesus’ story about the Ten Bridesmaids. It is one of the many stories he uses to try to describe the kingdom – or kin-dom – of heaven to us folks who just don’t get it. The story goes that some of the bridesmaids were wise and some were foolish.

Now we all know that it is better to be wise than to be foolish, right? Audrey West, a Bible scholar writing in the Christian magazine *Sojourners*, says that “few people would choose to identify with the five foolish women in the parable of the ten bridesmaids.” Well, come on, who would? “When their lamps sputter out,” she says, “they have no means to light the path for the bridegroom. They assume that the oil for their own lamps is the most important thing, so they run off in the middle of the night to buy more. This decision removes them from the scene just as they are called to do their part: to remain with the bridegroom as he enters into the feast.” How unfortunate!

“Jesus calls them foolish—*morai* in the original Greek, root of today’s offensive term *moron*. When these foolish ones finally reappear, after the feast has already begun, no one hearing the parable is surprised to learn that they have trouble getting through the door.” You must be able to relate to that awful feeling in the pit of your stomach when you knock and knock on a door, and no one comes to let you in. I know I can.

Our Bible scholar continues:

“It is easy to point fingers when faith in our own effort renders others unworthy. The foolish ones should have known better! Surely the festivities were a topic of conversation, with speculations about the menu, guest list, and so on. They had time to learn their duties as companions of the hosts. They should have gone to the market to stock up on supplies, just in case. They should have planned ahead.”

Well....I wonder who among us has never procrastinated? I don’t know about you, but I seem to be getting worse! I can probably push a deadline so far into the future that it falls right off the

calendar. That project due by the first of the year? Oh, I have plenty of time. That phone call to my doctor? I'll just take care of that later. That winter emergency kit for the trunk of the car? Maybe I'll put it together next month. The return of the Messiah? Oh yeah, well, it's been so long already, I bet there is still time to live like it matters.

"Perhaps the bridesmaids would have been better prepared for a delay if they had remembered *this particular* groom is different. He's always trying to enlarge his circle of connections. All reports suggest the sort of Messiah who would stop along the way to dine with sinners, to talk to a foreigner, or to heal a person with leprosy." Such compassion! How does he get any work done?

"One time he even paused at the side of a mountain to assure people (to their faces, no less!) of God's great blessing, despite the world's insistence otherwise. The mourners, the meek, the merciful; the persecuted, the peacemakers, the poor in spirit: together with all who hunger and thirst for righteousness, these are the recipients of God's favour. If the bridesmaids had thought about it at all, they probably could have guessed that a commitment to outreach would surely delay this bridegroom once again.

The wise bridesmaids, for their part, must have read up on emergency preparations for wedding feasts. Not only do they bring oil inside their lamps, they each carry a spare flask, too, which is basically the only thing they get right. But they seem so proud of this accomplishment—you can just imagine them strutting around – proud enough to grasp it with clenched fists and refuse to let go."

"When the foolish sisters finally come back and ask them to share, their answer is swift and cold: *there's not enough*; go buy your own. Their response reveals the insidious assumption that there is only so much oil—that is, only so much good in the world—to go around. Their lamps are lit, but their vision is limited."

The question is: Why don't they SHARE the oil with the others? Why do they take on the belief in *scarcity*, rather than embrace the belief in *abundance*?

"This fear of losing blinds the so-called wise bridesmaids to the truth that by hoarding the oil, they diminish the event. Five lamps at full strength provide no more light than ten lamps at half strength, right? But five extra *people* at the party would almost surely result in a more substantial celebration.

Furthermore, the women act as if it were possible to purchase the most important thing with their private resources. What about sharing resources first, and then relying upon God?

Throughout the parable, the behavior of the bridesmaids (wise or foolish) is so poor, one wonders how they managed to wrangle an invitation to the wedding in the first place. Not one of them deserves to enter through the door with the bridegroom. The wise women are selfish, while the foolish ones run off just at the moment when they should be present to welcome the

groom. All of them operate on the mistaken belief that the most important thing about the procession is the oil (the material thing), instead of the celebration (the spiritual experience) itself. And like the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, *all* of them fail at their fundamental charge by falling asleep in the first place.

What sets the wise bridesmaids apart from the foolish is not the presence or absence of extra oil, but whether or not they remain where they are supposed to be – in the company of the bridegroom. All ten could have walked through that door together. Imagine the celebration that could have been!”

Here at Melville United Church, you have a very dynamic and active Social Justice and Outreach team. I found this out because I was invited to attend their meetings and support their efforts. Now, I hope I’m not stealing your thunder, Jane (who is the chair), but I want to share all the positive things that are going on with just this one committee.

One thing is this marvelous “Cozy Closet” clothing give-away. Now where can you go to just be able to pick up good used clothing completely for free? We heard that one very grateful mom was trying to pay \$50 for all the warm clothing she got for her kids, and because of this mom’s insistence, Jane just decided to add the money to what your church gives to charity. I heard that the people who come are just so very grateful! Hence the committee’s decision to add two more pick-up dates to the church calendar. Now even I can quit procrastinating and go through my own closets, finding a surprising amount of stuff I haven’t worn in years, but which is perfectly good.

Then there is the Christmas Gift Program. You’d think that people at church wouldn’t be so excited about simply donating money to buy gift cards – after all, isn’t it more fun to go shopping and buy what WE think people will want? Well, this program is one that allows the recipient to have the *choice* of what to buy their own relative or their own child – something that they know the person actually wants and needs! What a wonderful idea. And an even more wonderful response! You seem to keep on *adding* to the number of how many children can receive gifts this Christmas.

Then there is the CW Mobile Market and the CW Food Bank. The list goes on and on! You also get to hear about and gain awareness of social justice issues discussed throughout the wide church in your Sunday services each month.

So bravo, SJ & O team! We are rooting for you and supporting you, as an entire congregation. Maybe people like Kelly Waterhouse, once baptized in this church building many years ago, can find it more *familiar* and less *foreign*, as she says. Familiar because this church intentionally connects to a hurting world, and doesn’t barricade itself away from it. That we bravely encounter those who, especially these days, are overwhelmed with the simple cost of living. Those who might have to make the choice between paying their rent, or eating. Or paying their utility bill, instead of buying that warm coat so badly needed in the cold winter wind. Or paying for whatever is essential, rather than getting their kid a toy that they are looking forward to

Santa bringing them this year. This is all too real, my friends. As they say, you can't make this stuff up.

All of this points to ways in which we seek to be in solidarity with the One who calls us to "stay awake". What does Jesus mean when he asks us this? Isn't Christ's presence continually among us as we are waiting? Considering that these Biblical texts are read by us nearly 2,000 years later, our focus might not be on our hopes for the end times, but perhaps on the inescapable fact of our own mortality. Consider this: What have we been putting off with the expectation that we'll somehow have time to make things right? Reconciling with a loved one, fulfilling a promise, volunteering, making a pilgrimage, maybe even answering a call to ministry? Will our legacy be one of action or an untouched "to do" list?

Let us go forth today, knowing that God loves us, supports us, wants us to follow his Son Jesus, the Holy One who still lives among us. May it be so. Amen.