I think it likely that there was at least one young woman among the “wise” group who said, "Aw, come on, we've got enough oil for the party tonight! Let's get going. Party on!" But the others did not listen to her; they likely listened to another group member whose opinion they valued, the hidden influencer, and then they went out and purchased more oil. Thus, all five, even the one who argued that they did not need more oil, made it into the wedding feast and are credited as being wise.

Likewise, in the foolish group, I imagine there was at least one member who said, "You know, I don't think we have enough oil. We should run to Fleet Farm and get another jug." But instead, they listened to their "hidden influencer," the bridesmaid who said, "We have plenty." And her word, so valued (although wrong!) was the word they followed. Thus, all five, even the one who advocated getting more oil, found themselves excluded from the festivities and branded as foolish.

Now, apply this to the church, where there are also hidden influencers. A true story: There is a church with a reputation as a "difficult" congregation. (FYI: it is not us!) Every two or three years, its pastor moved on, and the denominational office helped the church find a new one, who in turn, lasted only a short time.

Finally, a new pastor took the time to investigate the congregational dynamics. By asking questions (doing a little snowball sampling) among the members about who should be involved in church plans, and by listening carefully at meetings, he concluded that the primary source of upset and unrest among the membership was one particular woman. She was a major financial contributor to the church, and she had her own ideas about how the place should be run.

When things did not go as she thought they should, she was vocal and persistent in trampling down new ideas and proposals. She bad-mouthed the pastors and staff, and, because her career was in a highly respected profession, some people in the church assumed she must be right. Many people found her intimidating and few stood up to her. There were a few "allies" who supported her, but the pastor concluded that while they were not helpful, they were basically followers, not initiators of trouble.

Finally, the pastor decided to confront this woman about her behavior and its negative effect on the congregation. He recruited a couple of respected church members and someone from the denominational office, and together, this team staged an "intervention" with the message that either this woman changed her ways, or she must leave the congregation. Thankfully, the intervention succeeded. The woman dropped her defenses long enough to listen to this team. She subsequently worked to be more cooperative and less negatively influential on other members. The congregation soon lost its reputation as a “troubled” church.

Another true story: There is a church, smaller than the one mentioned above, but active and healthy. Its pastor has served them for more than a decade. He describes it as the "least contentious and happiest church" he ever served. He names several reasons, but one positive factor is a member whom others both respect and like. He owns his own business, which has a good reputation. He is friendly and approachable. He is supportive of the church, and quick to thank others for their contributions and help. On the few occasions when he speaks against a proposed church program, it is with a well-reasoned comment and never as an attack on anyone. The pastor believes that part of the reason the church is a good place to be is because of the positive atmosphere that this man helps create.

A visitor wouldn't realize the hidden power of either the woman at the first church or the man at the second one, and perhaps not even regular attendees would immediately be able to point to these individuals as powerful behind-the-scenes players. In both cases, however, they are significant contributors, “hidden influencers,” to the congregational dynamic.

Now I want you to consider *your* role in our congregation; not the committees on which you serve or the office you hold, but rather your role as a “hidden influencer.” How do you affect the tone, the spiritual ambiance, and the overall atmosphere of the church? Is your influence positive or negative? How would others describe your power?

Some of us might conclude that we do not affect the church much at all, and that is fine, if we are correct. Not everybody is an influencer. But others of us may realize that our impact is indeed outsized, which can be a good thing. We might even consider it a spiritual gift. Among the gifts Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 12, is "forms of leadership" (v. 28), which is a rendering of the Greek word kybernesis, a nautical term meaning "to steer" or "to pilot." But remember that on a ship, while the captain may direct the course, the actual steering is often done by a crew member whose presence at the helm influences everybody on board. The helmsman’s influence is indeed outsized: if that sailor follows the prescribed course, the impact on the ship is helpful, even a blessing; but if that sailor has contrary ideas about where the vessel should go and acts on them, there will soon be problems for everyone aboard.

If you are one of the hidden influencers in our congregation, then it is important for you to exercise that gift prayerfully and with civility, putting aside selfish goals, and working to make the church a place of blessing, inspiration, and welcome.

If you are not an influencer, but instead are someone who take cues from others, then it is important prayerfully to consider whose ideas or attitudes you embrace and whose counsel you value as you participate in the life of our church. Choose to follow people who personify the good news of the gospel, then you will be counted among the wise, with plenty of oil in your lamps, and ready to do the work of the Lord.  We who follow Jesus all have a responsibility to build up, not dismantle, the kingdom of God. So, whether you consider yourself a leader or a follower, the spirit in which you support the ministry of the church will go a long way toward making it or breaking it.

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**The Power of the Hidden Influencer**

Sunday, November 8, 2020 Matthew 25:1-13

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

I want to talk about snowballs. Actually, "snowball sampling." I am not talking about measuring the size or density or quality of actual snowballs. This kind of snowball is a research tool. Snowball sampling is used by sociologists for exploratory research.

For example: it would be difficult to find a list of homeless people in our city. So how would a church develop a ministry to the homeless? You might use snowball sampling. You would find one or two homeless people to help you. They know other homeless individuals in their area and can help you locate them. Researchers start by asking a few members of the target population, "Whom should we talk to?" Then they ask the same question of those people, and soon the pool gets larger and larger. It "snowballs." Hence the name.

And then, something happens! One or two names keep popping up. The person or persons that everyone names are "the hidden influencers," a person whose opinions and ideas have an outsized influence on other members of the group. The hidden influencer may not be the group's designated leader, but such people are likely the ones who have a significant effect on the morale, level of cooperation, and outlook within the group.

With all that in mind, think about Jesus' parable of the ten bridesmaids. The primary point of the parable, of course, is about making adequate preparation for the return of the Lord. But I am taking a different approach to the text this morning. I want to consider who among the bridesmaids are the "influencers," especially as they end up in two groups, the five "wise" women and the five "foolish" ones.