

Bridesmaids and Oil

We continue this 4th Sunday in Lent, puzzling over some of the more difficult parables of Jesus found in the Gospel according to Matthew. And make no mistake, they are difficult!

The parable today takes place in the last week of Jesus' earthly life and is located just past the midpoint of Jesus' discourse on the end times. Like last week, the context is a wedding. It was common for weddings to take place at night. Guests would gather at the bride's house and when the bridegroom arrived, the bridesmaids would light their lamps and lead the wedding procession to the groom's house.

As you listen, I want to remind you that this parable is told, not to outsiders, but to Jesus' closest followers, those who will carry on the faith and launch the church.

[Read Matthew 25:1-13]

Reading this is like reliving an anxiety dream from which I awake in a panic. You know the ones I mean. It's exam day and suddenly I realize I forgot to study or I failed to go to any of the classes or do any of the reading. I'm not prepared! Or I dream I'm late – late for the exam or an international flight or worship on the day I am preaching and there is nothing I can do about it. My absence is glaring and my failure to show up prepared will cost me everything that matters to me because I forgot or overslept or wore the wrong clothes. I might try to redeem the situation by begging for mercy- but the professor or the flight attendant or the senior pastor says, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." A door that was once open to me closes...forever. And there I am, one of the foolish bridesmaids.

In reflecting on this passage, preaching professor Anna Carter Florence wrote, "This is one of those moments when I am saying, 'Thank you, Jesus, this is not the only parable about the Kingdom of Heaven.'"ⁱ I second that because, friends, I have struggled with this parable. Let's recap.

There are ten bridesmaids- all ten are invited, all show up with lamps.

Those called foolish chose to leave any extra oil at home, assuming what they already had in their lamps was enough. Those who were called wise seem to have planned ahead by bringing extra oil with them, just in case there was a delay, which is, of course, exactly what happened. The bridegroom took a whole lot longer to arrive than any of the ten anticipated. They all fall asleep. At the announcement of his coming, they all awaken with excitement and trimmed their lamps and burned them to light the way for the bridegroom. But the lamps of the five foolish ones immediately ran out of oil. They turned to their wise sisters and told them to share with them. And how did the five wise ones respond. The wise bridesmaids refused. They said they could not share with them and instead, told their fellow bridesmaid to go buy some for themselves. (One has to wonder: Did they really have 24-hour oil shops on the street corners?) The foolish bridesmaids took their advice and ran out to find more oil. The bridegroom arrived; the bridegroom and the wise ones entered the party; the foolish ones returned to find the door shut in their face; and the bridegroom refused to open it again, because he claimed he did not know them after all.

So, what are we to take from this parable? That we should not share with those who ask? That we should not rely on one another? That one mistake, one miscalculation, one moment of not being prepared might result in eternal banishment? Surely, Jesus isn't suddenly taking back all that he has said about self-giving and generosity and grace?

If you are thinking that this parable does not sound like most of Jesus' other teachings, you are not alone. Here are a few examples from earlier in Matthew's gospel:

Matthew 5:42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

Matthew 19:21 If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor.

Matthew 23:13 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven.ⁱⁱ

Someone in Bible study this week noted that this parable seems to fly in the face of the Feeding of the 5,000. If taking care of yourself were the main message of the gospels, the miracle of the loaves and fishes would never have happened. Jesus

wouldn't have lifted a finger for that hungry crowd, not if they hadn't packed their own picnic supper. As Carter Florence writes, "Instead of 'The Feeding of the 5,000, we would have 'The Moral of the Very Few Who Came Prepared.'"

So, again, what are we to make of this parable? There are many directions we could take. For today, I suggest we hold this parable loosely- not try to make every piece and part make sense. Perhaps this parable is not about sharing at all. Perhaps it is not harsh because God is harsh but in order to get our attention. The bridegroom in the parable is delayed- and some 2,000 years later the kingdom is still delayed. Waiting is hard. It is easy to become complacent, to lose hope, to become cynical and start to believe that life is just one blasted thing after another. Jesus wants more than that for us.

As Christians, we are called to wait in hope, to wait courageously and expectantly, and in the meantime, in the time between the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven in the person of Jesus Christ and his return to usher in the fullness of the kingdom, we are called to live faithfully- to let our light shine even in the darkness. Jesus knows this will be hard. There will be much to discourage us. Perhaps he tells this parable because he wants to prepare his disciples for faithfulness over the long haul. And so the bridegroom says, Keep awake. Be intentional about your life. Don't let your oil run dry. It is so easy to let habit shape our daily living- even when those habits don't nurture us.

The wise bridesmaids are wise not because they could predict when the bridegroom was coming. They were wise because they were ready for a timetable that might be different than the one they would have preferred- they carry with them an extra flask of oil. I won't try to determine exactly what the oil stands for except to say it is the kind of oil we need to keep God's light shining in and through us.

What fills you up spiritually and keeps you from running dry?

Where do you find God?

This parable invites us to pay purposeful attention to the ways in which we are or are not opening ourselves to God's refueling and refilling presence.

I imagine many of us, myself included, are running low on oil these days. I don't think we are running low on oil simply because we stay way too busy to pay attention to

our spiritual lives, though I know for some, the pressures and responsibilities they face are overwhelming. And I know that life itself has a way of draining our oil.

I believe there are external factors that contribute to the low oil condition many of us feel as well. The world is hurting, violence is a daily reality, weather events threaten lives at an alarming rate, illness and pandemic continue to hurt us, and it seems like the promise of peace and wholeness is far away. So many of our patterns have been disrupted and disordered by the pandemic and we are still figuring out how to live as community in new ways. And on top of that, our country, and the world seem more divided than ever. ⁱⁱⁱ The nightly news is simply devastating and it is relentless.

If we are paying a lot of attention to the violence and trauma around us, and at the same time, we stop paying attention to the light we carry within us, stop opening ourselves up to God's refueling and replenishing presence, then with only a few more news cycles we will find ourselves completely dried out, empty, with nothing left to give at the exact moment we need to be shining and lighting the way for ourselves and others.

The world needs our light more than ever.

How can we help shine light for someone who is stumbling in the darkness or for those who have lost hope?

What resources do you need to keep your light burning?

How can we help each other keep our lamps filled, for I do not believe we are called to go it alone?

As with every other direction I have explored with this text, this direction carries danger. It can sound like we need to carry with us everything we need- that it is all up to us to prepare which flies in the face of our understanding that God's grace is sufficient. We do not have to stockpile all we need. God has provides. God has given us all that we need.

But there is a tension. I do believe there is some oil that is ours to protect, to nurture, to steward if you will, not just for our sake but for the sake of others. Perhaps another question to ponder is **What is ours to take care of?**

To be clear, the oil in our lamps is not what saves us, it is what helps us navigate life in the meantime. Which brings me to one last thing: the shut door and the "no" of the

bridegroom's response when the foolish ones ask him to open it. I was helped with this by a member of our Bible Study. We do not know the tone of Jesus' voice for the bridegroom. One way we can hear it is "Truly I tell you, I do *not* know you." But what the person in Bible study heard was the voice of parent speaking to a child, "Truly I tell you, I do not *know* you." That is how pastor Shannon Kushner hears this as well. She says,

In his yearning I hear Jesus acknowledging a truth we also know. When we have not tended to our oil supply, when we have gotten so caught up in the anxiety, the fear, the violence, the exhaustion of our world and our lives that we have stopped spending regular time in prayer, in scripture, in worship, or in service, then we do not *know* Jesus as well as we do when we are prepared and ready both for the party and for the delay. I wonder if Jesus' statement is more a statement of a sad fact rather than a statement of a forever- closed door.^{iv}

Friends, the kingdom of God is not like an anxiety dream. It is a party filled with joy. And while it is wise to keep the oil in our lamps filled, we should remember that the oil is for use this side of eternity. There is already more than enough light at the banquet.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱCarter Florence, Anna. Sermon 2007.

ⁱⁱ Bolz-Weber, Nadia. Sermon: *Listening to Snakes and Bridesmaids*. February 26, 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wagner, Kimberly. Working Preacher.

^{iv} Kushner, Shannon, Sermon: Trimmed and Burning. 2017.