

Fill Your Lamp

Matthew 25:1-13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 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.’ 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. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Well, we seem to continue to have the best fall weather in the country. West of us in the Rockies and along the Eastern Seaboard, they’ve already had snow. And not just light flurries, but inches upon inches that have cut the power for many people. We know we’ll get it eventually, but we really don’t know when. Of course, even when we know, we are still sometimes surprised by the effects.

Remember a few years back, we had a pretty good blizzard blow through the Madison area. At some point, the snow started winning the war against the street plows, and even the interstate started to get snow-covered. And I’m not sure how it happened, but eventually, there were over 500 cars stuck in a 19-mile back up. None of those drivers were expecting to be stuck on the highway for over 24 hours. As they waited for the storm to end and the mess to be cleared away, cars started to run out of gas. The only way to get more was to wait for the National Guard to show up on snowmobiles to help. The Boy Scout motto is “Be Prepared.” In our Scripture this morning, Jesus tells us to remain awake and alert. But nonetheless, each of us has had a time when we were caught off-guard.

In our story this morning, it’s five bridesmaids. I know most of us, the women at least, know what bridesmaids do for modern weddings. But what was their role 2,000 years ago? Generally, the wedding took place at the groom’s house. When the wedding was ready to begin,

he would go to the bride's house and bring her home. The bridesmaids would be waiting at the bride's house to light the way for the groom.

In Jesus' parable, everything was set, but there was a glitch in the planning. The groom was late. There were a number of possible, legitimate reasons for this, and it shouldn't have been entirely unexpected. But the groom was so late that everyone got sick of waiting for him. All 10 of the bridesmaids were asleep when he finally arrived. Since their first job was to light the way to the house, they quickly prepped their lamps. All 10 discovered that during the delay, their lamps had burned dry. The five wise bridesmaids had brought extra oil, so they were quickly ready to welcome the groom. The five foolish bridesmaids had no extra, so they asked to borrow from the other five.

Apparently the wise women had only just enough oil for their own lamps, and if they were to share, no one would have enough. And it wouldn't do for there to be no lamps to welcome the groom. Five would be better than none. So the foolish five head off to find more oil. The story is a bit vague about what happens next. While the foolish ones are looking for oil, the groom retrieves his bride and goes to the wedding with her and the wise bridesmaids. Eventually, the foolish ones show up. Whether they ever found oil, we don't know. But they come to the house of the wedding, trying to get in. They were refused admittance when the groom said to them, "Truly, I don't know you."

Jesus then ends his parable by reminding his listeners to stay awake, because they don't know the day or the time. The day or the time of what? Jesus is vague about that, but this parable does come in the middle of a series of stories and lessons about the return of Christ. So we can pretty safely assume that Jesus is talking about his own return. Not his resurrection, but his return to reign, long after he ascends to heaven.

So a lot of sermons on this text have focused on the end of the parable. But in fact, there's an earlier crisis in the story that deserves our attention. When the groom is late, half of the women can't light their lamps. Half of the people are not prepared when the groom arrives. Is this a prediction or a cautionary tale? Does Jesus really think that half of all Christians will be caught off-guard when he returns? Well, what about you? If Jesus walked in right now, would that be easy for you to accept? After 2,000 years of waiting, I think most of us would have a difficult time really grasping the return of Christ.

Of course, the crisis most people know happens after that. When the foolish bridesmaids finally show up at the wedding, they are turned away. The groom says he doesn't even know who they are. It sounds eerily like something Jesus says earlier in Matthew: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me.'" This is not the warm and fuzzy Jesus we like to picture.

But it does help clarify things. Because in both of these passages Jesus says he does not know everyone who thinks they know him. Or perhaps it's more likely that we don't really know Jesus as well as we think we do. But it's that lack of relationship that leads to being shut out of the wedding feast. And that lack of relationship is directly related to running out of oil. And the reason I focus on that part of the story is because all of the bridesmaids run out of oil. No one is spared. Five are prepared to deal with it when it happens, but it does happen to everyone.

Jesus is telling us that we are going to run out of oil. So let's break down this parable. What exactly is this oil? We know that it fuels our light. We know that it can and will run out, but that it can be refilled. And we know that one person cannot share their oil with someone else.

Reverend Liz Forney once gave a lecture to seminary students about spiritual life. She brought an oil lamp, the kind with a wick and real oil in the bottom, and talked about how the role of the Christian is to be a light for others – “the light of the world.” Then she lit the wick and watched the lamp burn. But (and here was the rigged part), because there was only a tiny bit of oil in that lamp, it only burned for a few moments. She asked the students: what happens when the oil runs out? Well, then your light goes out, and you have nothing to give. A Christian with no oil can't be the light of the world for anybody, no matter how much they want to be.

If you've ever flown on an airplane, you've heard the speech about the oxygen masks. If they happen to fall, you should secure your own first, then help others who may need it. That's a hard concept for many Christians to grasp. After all, Jesus did tell us to be humble, and that the first would be last, etc. But when oxygen is at a premium, so is time. Even a short time of oxygen deprivation leads to confusion. If you help your children first, you will get so confused you can't put on your own mask. And your kids may not be able to help you. But if you secure your mask first, you will be able to help your kids. Who, during that short time, have suffered nothing but confusion.

The same is true of our spiritual lives. You cannot help someone understand why God is important to you if you don't make time for God in your own life. Dan Dick, the Director of Connectional Ministries in our conference office wrote an article recently about this. He was talking to pastors specifically when he wrote, “If you're too busy for God, you're too busy. Period.” But he could have written that to every Christian.

Filling your lamp is not an optional activity! But there are different activities that can fill your lamp. What fills you up spiritually when you run dry? What replenishes your oil? Maybe you pray best sitting by yourself in silence. Maybe you pray best in a group of people, all praying together. Maybe you connect most with God by moving, walking while you pray. This weekend I talked with the women on retreat about praying with prayer beads. There are countless ways to pray, and prayer isn't even the only thing that fills our lamps! Fasting, reading Scripture, meditating, journaling, serving, worshipping – all of these and more give us the oil we need to shine our lights in a world too-full of darkness.

The truth of the matter is that the groom is delayed. Jesus has not yet returned. And so each one of us will run out of oil. Those who are foolish will do nothing about it, trying to live their lives in the dark, saying they're too busy to go get more oil. But those who are wise will learn how to carry oil with them, at all times, so they can refuel whenever they need to. Because we don't know when something may happen to drain the oil from our lamps, to darken the light in our lives.

And that's why you fill your lamp. Not because you're afraid you're going to get locked out of the Kingdom of Heaven. You fill it because your job, your purpose, your great joy in life is to be a light. A light to others, a light in the darkness – yes. But it turns out that your oil gives light unto you as well. So you fill it out of personal need. You fill it to share the love of God with others. And you fill it out of hope that the longer your light shines, the brighter your light shines, the closer you are to seeing Jesus. Amen and amen.