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*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 foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As 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.*

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Ok. Let’s just go ahead and call out the elephant in the room: this is a tough parable. It doesn’t have a feel-good moment of redemption, such as when the forgiving father embraces his prodigal son. At first glance, it doesn’t leave us with the assurance that all we need is a little faith the size of, say, a mustard seed to do incredible things in God’s name. It doesn’t deliver, at least at first reading, a measure of encouragement or hope. It ends, rather, with a door slammed in the faces of five persons who didn’t have a little bit of oil in their lamps. Sounds pretty petty to me. And I don't know about you, but a petty kingdom of heaven doesn’t sound like good news to my sensibilities.

So, for a moment, let us lean into the cognitive dissonance of this parable. My preaching professor, Anna Carter Florence, when she comes to puzzling texts like this one, often reads other passages in the same book (in this case, Matthew’s Gospel) through the lens of this text. So for example, she interprets other passages in Matthew’s Gospel through the implied wisdom of this parable. And these are her findings:

*(Matthew 6:19ff) Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, although to get there, you will need large oil reserves, so forget the first part of what I said; store up for yourselves oil on earth, so that you will have treasure in heaven. Or (Matthew 6:25ff) Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body what you will wear. Worry about your oil; that's the main thing. Worry about whether you have enough for you, and forget about everyone else; they are not your problem. Or (Matthew 7:7ff) Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you, unless of course you're late and the bridegroom answers, in which case, you might as well forget it. Or (Matthew 7:12ff) In everything do unto others as you would have them do to you. In everything, that is, except oil, which changes all the rules.[[1]](#footnote-2)*

As you can tell by this tongue-in-cheek response, we get into some tricky water with pesky parables such as the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids when we turn it into some sort of blanket statement that applies in *all* situations and *all* contexts. But ignoring this parable isn’t a faithful option. And neither is glossing over its rough edges. So let’s wrestle a little bit with the text, shall we?

There is much in this text we don’t know. When we journeyed through this text last week in the library on Tuesday, several of you asked great questions. Why was the bridegroom so late? Why is the bride so noticeably absent in this story? Why is the bridegroom such a jerk to the bridesmaids without oil? And, for that matter, why were the other bridesmaids so stingy with theirs? Couldn’t they share? Wouldn’t that be the “Jesus” thing to do? The “neighborly” thing to do?

**The answer to these questions, I don’t know. But I’ll tell you what I do know to be true. A lamp doesn’t need oil to be trimmed; but it sure as heck needs it to burn. And there are times, I believe, when God calls upon me in the unexpected hour to be ready to shine that light for myself, and others, so that we can all get to the party together.** As recently as this very week, I’ve stood in this sanctuary asking, pleading with God to give me a little oil. But then again the foolish bridesmaids asked for the same thing in today’s story and got a door slammed in their face. And so I revised my prayer, “God, if you can’t give me a little oil, help me find it. Help me cultivate it. Help me have just enough to do the next right thing, to shine *your* light through me.” I trust, my beloveds, that I’m not the only person in this room who’s prayed that prayer or some version of it. And that gives me hope.

You see, when it comes to oil, you and I don’t need barrels of the stuff - and neither did the bridesmaids. As far as we know, the wise bridesmaids only owned the amount of oil that was in their lamps. And as far as we know, the foolish bridesmaids were sittin’ on barrels of the stuff back at home; we just know they didn’t have any on their person. The parable doesn’t fault them for not having oil for months, weeks, or even days. They’re labeled as foolish because they didn’t have any *on their person* when the moment mattered.

And so I’m comforted with the fact that this parable teaches me that I just need enough oil to get me through today. Tomorrow’s oil will worry about itself. Today’s oil, however, is my responsibility. And the tricky truth of this parable is that there are some kinds of oil that we *can’t* share with one another with the same convenience as sharing a cup of milk, a stick of butter, a couple AA batteries, a cough drop, or an aspirin. There are some kinds of oil that we have to have on our person when the time comes to use it. In college, if I didn’t study for one of my exams, I couldn’t go to a fellow classmate five minutes before the test and say, “Hey, you studied, right? Can I borrow some of your knowledge real quick?” One married couple can’t go to another and say, “Wow, y’all have a really strong relationship! Can we borrow some of that?” If I haven’t done the work to be a compassionate human being, and the time comes when God is calling me to share that with someone else, I can’t turn to a neighbor and say, “Wow. You’re really compassionate. Can I have some of that to give to this person?” No, that’s oil that I need to have on my person when the time comes.

Now, hear me clearly, church. I’m *not* saying that we’re all on our own to do this. I’m *not* saying that each of us is called to do this work alone or in isolation. On the contrary, we’re all in this together. We’re a family. We’re a team. We’re a neighborhood. We can, and should, pray for one another, encourage one another. Share resources that we can share, like wisdom and courage. Those things are true…*and* it’s also true that there are things we have to have on our person for when Jesus shows up and God’s light needs to shine.

When are those moments, I wonder? When exactly does Jesus show up in the unexpected hour? Well, it might not be as unexpected as we might think. You see, I don’t think this parable is about the so-called “Second Coming.” I think this passage is much more about being prepared for the present than it is about some abstract future time when we die (notice no where in the passage is there mention of death or dying). No, this passage is about having a little bit of oil here and now for when Jesus shows up. And if we’re curious about when Jesus shows up, we only have to skip a few verses from the end of today’s parable to get the answer. Hear these words from later on in Chapter 25 of Matthew’s Gospel:

*‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”[[2]](#footnote-3)*

Friends, we keep our lamps trimmed and burning, because Jesus comes to us here and now as the hungry. Jesus comes to us here and now as the thirsty. Jesus comes to us here and now as the stranger. Jesus comes to us here and now as the naked, the sick, the incarcerated. And in those moments, we aren’t called upon to have invested in barrels upon barrels of oil. We aren’t called to walk this world with a life-time supply of the stuff. No, we’re called to have just enough, just a little, just a little daily bread, to share with Jesus when his comes to us as the neighbor in need.

So friends, let us keep our lamps trimmed and burning, because we know neither the day nor the hour.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**

1. https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002671/filling\_stations [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Matthew 25:31-40 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)