

What's In Our Lamps?

Matthew 25:1-13

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 12) 2023

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Let us pray: O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our strength and our redeemer.

Amen.

The truth be told, today we begin Advent. I know, I know that officially Advent begins this year on Sunday, Dec. 3, but thematically and theologically, the scripture readings after All Saints Sunday (last week) up until Christmas are all about getting ready for coming day of God. Christ has come. Christ comes. And Christ will come.

This morning we begin with Matthew 25 and the parable of the ten wise and foolish bridesmaids. This chapter also contains the parable of the talents and the parable of the sheep and the goats. Three big important parables. Three parables about preparing and being ready because the day of the Lord is coming.

New Testament professor at the Perkins School of Theology, Alyce McKenzie, writes that she once led a yearlong spirituality class with about a dozen students committed to the practices of Christian prayer. Over the Christmas break, each student committed to read a particular book of the Bible prayerfully from beginning to end. One of student, a young man, recounted that after Christmas his wife had gone to visit her parents in another city for several days. That left him home in their apartment with their puppy, an English beagle named Sadie. Every night around 10 pm he would sit on the loveseat and spend half an hour on his devotional reading. Soon she began hopping up and sitting next to him on the

couch and putting her head in his lap. One night he got caught up in watching the news and didn't go to the loveseat at the prescribed time. Sadie came over and began to pull at his pant legs. One night he was exhausted and went to bed at 9:45. Just as he was drifting off to sleep, he heard a whimpering and felt the blanket being pulled off the bed. Looking over the side of the bed, there was Sadie, his bedspread in her teeth, there to call him to prayer. He decided that some dogs were bird dogs, and some dogs were sheep dogs, but that Sadie was a prayer dog. Prof. McKenzie says this parable of the Ten Bridesmaids is a Prayer Dog parable.

It reminds us some things are so important and essential that we need to tend to them instead of being distracted.

Matthew's community couldn't afford to be distracted. They were a small, struggling congregation surrounded by an antagonistic society. Not too many years before, the surrounding society was mostly oblivious to this tiny enclave of Christ-followers. But in recent years things had started turning ugly. A lot of those to whom Matthew was writing had been excommunicated from the synagogue and abandoned by their families, on top of facing the imminent threat of a hostile empire. What had been benevolent or neutral toward them could no longer be taken for granted. They could not make assumptions about the wider supporting structures. These believers were struggling just to survive in that dark time, so there was urgency to come together, stick together, and reconnect in a community of faith that can endure.

So, Matthew remembers these parables of Jesus and writes them down so this little church can make it. And not just make it but make it as faithful followers of Jesus.

Jesus says, The news goes out that the bridegroom is coming so the ten bridesmaids need to get ready for the traditional big party that evening. All ten get their lamps ready and fill them with oil and head out to meet the bridegroom. Five wise bridesmaids take extra oil while five foolish bridesmaids do not. All ten arrive at the wedding venue excited that the bridegroom is coming. Except, the bridegroom does not show up. They wait and wait. A message arrives saying that the bridegroom will be delayed. He's coming but it's going to take a while. So, they wait and wait some more. Eventually, they get tired of waiting and start dozing off and soon all ten drift off to sleep.

Late, around midnight, a herald beats on the door, shouting, "The bridegroom is arriving! Come on everybody! Come out to meet him! Trim the wicks and relight your lamps and light the way! It's party time!"

The problem is that only five have enough oil with them to keep their lamps lit, while the other five are running low and burning out. They try to borrow oil from the wise bridesmaids but cannot, so the foolish bridesmaids frantically rush out looking for a 24/7 convenience store that carries lamp oil. Meanwhile, everyone else goes into the party and shuts the door. The groom refuses to open up even when the five return with lamps burning, crying out, "Lord, Lord." But the door remained slammed in their face with an unexpectedly terse and emphatic, "I don't know you!" The parable concludes with these words, "Be alert! Be ready! For you have no idea when the bridegroom will return!"

Part of why I referred to this as an Advent parable is this closing admonition, "Keep watch!" "Keep awake!" "Be ready!" These are primary Advent themes. In verse 10, it says that while the five foolish and unprepared bridesmaids rushed out

to find some more oil, the bridegroom arrived and “those who were ready went with him.”

Which begs the question: ready for what? All ten were ready for the bridegroom. All were watching and eagerly waiting. At the same time, all ten drifted off to sleep. No one can be perpetually alert and standing on tiptoes looking out the window all the time. Everyone gets tired and everyone drifts off to sleep sooner or later.

What makes the five bridesmaids wise and distinctive is not because they were ready for the groom, but because they were ready for the groom’s *delay*. (see Tom Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*, p. 280-281). To bring along an extra flask of oil means they were ready for the bridegroom to come early or late. If he had shown up early, all ten were ready and would have gone into the banquet. But the bridegroom – like Christ and the kingdom – did not arrive promptly; he was delayed. For Matthew’s struggling and exhausted church, he was delayed. Furthermore, for some two thousand years he’s still delayed. The wise ones in the church are those who are prepared for the delay – those who hold on to the faith deep into the night. And even though they see no bridegroom coming, they still serve, still hope, still pray, and still wait for the promised return of the kingdom of God and the bridegroom (Long, p. 281).

I read of a seminary professor who brings an old-fashioned oil lamp to her class on the spiritual life every semester. It’s the kind of lamp with a wick and real oil in the bottom. She talks with the class about how the role of the pastor, indeed the role of the Christian, and the role of the church, for that matter, is to be a light for others – “the light of the world.” Somewhere during the lecture and discussion, she lights the wick and while they continue the lamp burns. Before class, she had

put only a tiny bit of oil in the lamp, so it burns only for a few minutes before going out. She then asks the students: what happens when the oil runs out? Well, when the lamp goes out in class, the lights come on with the students and they are engaged. Someone says, “When the oil runs out, you have nothing to give.” Someone else will usually say, “You have burn-out.” Most everyone chimes in, and a burned-out pastor or one with no oil, or a Christian with no oil, cannot be the light of the world for anybody, no matter how much they want to.

So, the question is raised for all of us, what fills us up spiritually when we run dry? What is in our lamps and what replenishes our oil? Where do we find God in the middle of a long, dark night? How can we make sure that we get enough of that oil for our lamps? Because – and we all know this – we will run dry. And when we do, we can’t be a light for anybody.

A friend of mine who is a pastor and preacher told me that years ago her teenage son walked into the kitchen at 5:30 and said, “What’s for dinner?” She said, “Meatloaf,” and the teenager said, “What, again?” My friend said at that point, she lost it and suddenly morphed into Godzilla, right there in the kitchen. Her teenager stood there and let her rant and when she had finished, he calmly looked at her and said, “Let me guess. You’re out of oil.”

When the arrow on the gas tank points to empty, we are going to run out of gas. If a two-year-old doesn’t get a nap, she is going to melt-down. When we haven’t had a conversation with our spouse in three weeks that hasn’t revolved around planning and scheduling logistics, our marriage is getting dry. If we have worked extended hours for longer than we care to know, our relationships are going to suffer. If we don’t pay attention to exercise and what we eat for thirty

years, our body is going to let us know about it. If we do not tend to our oil, it will sooner or later catch up with us.

It is also true, there are some kinds of oil we can't borrow from someone else. Students learn this. You can borrow someone's homework or download an essay from the internet, but sooner or later will be the reckoning of the final exam and it'll be discovered whether you burnt the midnight oil truly studying the material. There are some kinds of preparation we can only do for ourselves. There are some reserves that no one else can build up for us. We can't borrow someone else's peace of mind or their passion for God. We can't say to our friend, "You have such a happy marriage. Could you give me some of that?" It doesn't work. We have to find it ourselves. We have to figure out what fills us up spiritually, how to get it, and then make sure we have enough to carry with us, every day.

And here's the thing: we will run out. Time will run out. The hour gets late, everyone gets sleepy. We all doze, we all put it off, saying, "One of these days, I'm going to quit working so hard and I'll put in that quality time with my kids." "One of these days, I'm going quit flitting around and really get involved with God and church." We all doze. We all live distracted lives. We all put it off. And then the shout goes up: "He's coming! It's time. The day is today!" And we're caught unprepared and don't have our flask of oil.

My old teacher in Atlanta, Dr. Fred Craddock, told of a woman he knew whose entire spiritual life consisted of reading Hallmark cards. She rarely ever came to church, never read the Bible, nor spent time in prayer. She read Hallmark cards. They were quick, easy to digest, and easily remembered. Sort of like living on social media memes today.

Anyway, the day came when she was in the hospital diagnosed with terminal cancer. Dr. Craddock went by to see her, and he remembered that on the table next to her bed was a stack of cards three inches high, but as he put it, “there wasn’t enough sustenance in that stack of cards to keep a bird alive,” yet that was all she had to get her through.

The time will come when we have to draw on the oil we have, right here, in our flask. Good intentions and long-range plans will not suffice; “one of these days” kind of spirituality won’t be enough. Reading spiritual junk food on social media won’t help you survive. It must come from God. Today, not tomorrow, we start reaching down and refueling our lamps in the Living God.

My guess is that of those five wise bridesmaids, more than one of them were prepared because they hung around other wise bridesmaids. Perhaps there was only one who was mature and well-disciplined and planned ahead. But the other four had enough sense to hang out with her so her preparations rubbed off on them, and they too learned to prepare. One reason we have a community in Christ – we call it church – is so we hang out with one another and learn good habits from each other, support one another, and hold each other accountable.

And finally, let’s not get forget the purpose of it all. These bridesmaids were ready, not out of fear of being locked out, but because they were excited about getting to see the bridegroom and going to the wedding banquet.

The Christian life and church are not about fear. It’s not fear-based religion or a fear-based Advent. We keep our lamps filled because of joy. We fill your flasks out of hope. The joy and hope that the kingdom of God in Christ is coming, and all will be made right.

Jim Wallis tells the story of being in South Africa back during the dark days of Apartheid. Wallis was at St. George's Cathedral, in Cape Town where Nobel Prize winner, Archbishop Desmond Tutu preached. There had been a political rally canceled by the white government and Tutu called for a worship service instead. So, the beautiful cathedral was packed with people who were black, who were poor, who were the left-out and overlooked and who were ground down with despair. The power of apartheid was frighteningly evident in the numbers of riot police and armed soldiers massed outside of the church. Inside, all along the cathedral walls, stood more police openly taping every word spoken from the pulpit and videotaping everyone who was in attendance. When Tutu rose to speak the atmosphere was tense. And when he confidently proclaimed that the evil and oppression of the system of apartheid cannot prevail, he was probably one of the few people in the entire world who actually believed it.

Tutu pointed his finger right at the police recording him, "You may be powerful, indeed very powerful, but you are not God! And the God whom we serve," said Tutu, "cannot be mocked! You have already lost!" he thundered. Then he came out from behind the pulpit and seemed to soften, flashing his famous smile. "So, since you have already lost, as we have already just made clear," he shouted with glee, "We are inviting you to come and join the winning side!"

The whole place erupted, the police seemed to scurry out of the way, and the congregation rose up in triumphal dancing. Everyone danced and sang and danced and shouted with joy as the police stood and looked at one another, not knowing what to do. The singing and dancing spilled out into the streets where an even larger crowd joined. It was chaos, it was joy, it was hope!

Someday the bridegroom will come and there will be a big banquet, a cosmic party. According to Jesus, **there will be a day, someday** when the sorrow of this world will be turned into dancing; **there will be a day, someday** when justice will run down like an ever-flowing stream; **there will be a day, someday** when the Earth is made new. **There will be a day, someday** when hurt is changed into singing, and when the despair is lifted up into shouting! **There will be a day, someday** when every tear shall be wiped away and when death shall be no more! **There will be a day, someday** when mourning and crying and pain will be no more!

There will be a day, someday so we sing and dance **today**. **Today** we are preparing our oil flasks. We serve and pray **today** so our lamps will be lit. It's going to be something! It'll be the party of all time and you don't want to miss it!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.