

Sermon – November 12, 2023

When the Oil Lamp Runs Dry! Matthew 25:1-13

Prayer: Sprit of life, open us to this parable in Matthew's gospel so we may fully understand the depth of your mercy and wideness of your love. Amen.

If you're going to ask me what my favourite parable is, I guarantee you, it will not be the parable of the 10 bridesmaids. It will not even be listed in my top ten best parables. Not me! This parable does not make me feel good. This parable challenges most of the things I believe about God and Jesus. For me, it doesn't make sense to compare this parable with that of the Kingdom of Heaven. I don't want to preach on the 5 wise bridesmaids, who have extra oil but didn't share with the foolish. I don't want to criticize and point fingers at the 5 foolish bridesmaids who left their post to get more oil, thus making them late for the wedding. And I detest preaching about the bridegroom, who was interpreted by many Christians as Jesus Christ who is coming again but shutting the door to the foolish bridesmaids and turning a deaf ear to their pleas to come in. What do we do with a difficult parable like this? Do we completely ignore it and not explore its message? Certainly not.

Before we get too excited about this parable, it is important to understand how weddings were celebrated in the first century. In ancient Jewish tradition, weddings begin with a proposal between the fathers of the bride and groom. The fathers would arrange the marriage by exchanging an engagement contract. The engagement, which is the waiting period, could last up to a year. The groom keeps himself busy at work with the aim of preparing a place for his bride, supporting her and any children that they may have. During this period, it was up to the bridesmaids to wait for the groom. The bridesmaids were younger sisters or cousins or close friends and, according to Jewish tradition, there were usually ten. It is the custom that the groom arrives in a procession at night in order for the whole town to be home and be able to celebrate. The bridesmaids carried torches that were ignited with oil. When the groom comes, he collects his bride and her bridesmaids walk alongside her, singing, dancing and creating an atmosphere of celebration. The procession went throughout the town and all came out to

celebrate with the bride and the groom, to signify that the period of waiting was over. The procession then culminated in a feast that often lasted up to seven days.

But here's the thing – even if this parable is my least favourite, I've gleaned some important truths about what it means to be human. For most of my life, I have identified with the five wise bridesmaids, always seeking to have enough oil in my lamp – achievements, a good reputation, values and faith – to come prepared when things get tough. The truth is - I do like to be prepared. I believe in being prepared, and I bet some of you do, too. We are part of a culture that practically loves planning, organizing, forethought and preparation for the unknown that lies ahead. I think this is why we get so frustrated when something goes horribly wrong. We love to be on the safe side – to be like the 5 wise bridesmaids who had extra oil and were ready for the long haul! They consider and take seriously the possibility of surprise, of delay, of challenges, of unpredictability.

And there are times, too, when I see myself as the five foolish bridesmaids, having just enough oil to last me for a day – just enough energy, just enough patience, just enough resources, just enough faith. Some of you may know that I don't enjoy driving. If I could just walk to work, I'd do it, but I can't. It's too far and it's not very safe. And you know what gets me anxious about driving? It's when I'm still quite far from my destination and the arrow on the gas tank points to empty and I hear the ding-ding sound that indicates the vehicle is going to run out of gas. When that happens, my stress level crawls up even if I keep hearing Ken's voice, which says: don't worry - you still have enough gas to take you home! I know what it means to run out of oil, and I guess you do, too. Here's a classic example. After a long, tiring day at work and you just want to fix a quick dinner, your son walks into the kitchen and says, "Mom, what's for dinner?" and you say, "pizza," and he says, "huh? pizza again? We had that last week!" - and suddenly you lose your cool and turn into an incredible hulk and you get upset at your son for such an inconsiderate remark. And he looks at you calmly and says, "Mom – chill! I think you're out of oil." Other times I watched with despair as my lamp's light slowly evaporated in thin air, sometimes quite resentful of those whose lamps still burned so brightly.

Matthew narrates that all 10 bridesmaids, the wise and the foolish, fell asleep when they should have been kept awake. And it was the bridegroom, not the bridesmaids, who broke

social protocol. He took his time and arrived late for the wedding. Surely the foolish ones cannot be shut out for being late to the banquet! The bridegroom was the late one!

But what would have happened, I wonder, had the foolish bridesmaids simply continued to wait, with flickering lamps? What would have happened if they simply waited in the darkness of the night? Waiting is difficult, waiting is hard. But I think they should have persisted no matter what. They left when they should have stayed. They redirected their time and energy to looking for oil and missed the wedding party altogether. Sometimes, it is easy to tell ourselves not to worry - that there's always tomorrow and we'll get to it when the time comes. What if there's no time left for us? What if this parable is telling us to seize the day? To act now? To live as if today is all we have? To do what is just and necessary *now*?

What are we to do with those wise ones who did not share even an ounce of oil - those who chose their needs over the needs of others? Some preachers have even elevated them to be emulated by us. How can we sympathize with their selfish behaviour? "We cannot share with you because we might not have enough for ourselves. We're not sure, but just to be safe, we're not sharing what we have." Is this good news here? Be prepared, hang onto your oil, and remember that only a fool gives it away. Well, that's depressing for me. Couldn't we reasonably conclude that perhaps Matthew portrayed some kind of injustice in this parable? Or is the Kingdom of Heaven really no different than the empires of the earth, where we hoard material goods for our own survival?

Truth be known, the part of this story that irritates me the most is when the bridegroom closes the door and leaves the five foolish bridesmaids out in the cold. But let's get this straight. Closed doors happen to us all the time! Lost opportunities. Time is running out. Chances fading. Debie Thomas reminds us that "*one of the great tragedies of Christian history is that we are better known for policing our borders than for welcoming our neighbours. We are quick to say, "I don't know you," to those who believe or practice differently than we do. We feel safer and more pious behind closed doors than we do with open arms. Maybe this parable is showing us the ugliness of the closed door.*" This makes me think even more that Jesus is not the bridegroom in this parable.

Where do you find yourself in this difficult parable? Like the 10 bridesmaids, we too are called to be carriers of light. What do you see when you look into your lamp? Is it full of oil,

running out, or empty? Is your lamp burning brightly or is it growing dim? Have you been the foolish ones whose lamps have run out? the wise who feared sharing and losing what they had? the bridegroom who refused to let people in?

Remember what the 10 bridesmaids were waiting for? It wasn't a funeral. It was a wedding. This is not a parable about what happens at the end of life. This is a parable about life here and now. So, if you find yourself feeling like a foolish bridesmaid, remember to wait even when it feels your light is running low. Don't run from it. It is a holy place and God will meet you there. If you find yourself feeling like a wise bridesmaid, remember to share what you have, even if it scares you. The opportunity to give to yourself is a holy place and God will meet you there. And if you find yourself feeling like the bridegroom, remember to open the door wide to the banquet feast. Don't let hurt feelings and fear insulate you from others. Welcoming those who have made mistakes and those who walk with overflowing confidence is a holy place. God will meet you there.

Do you know how your oil will be replenished? It will come from where you have seen God today. Your lamp will be filled again and again when you recognize God in the places that need healing and in the people that you meet.

Well, I think I need to change my mind about this story. After preaching it today, I have a good feeling that it will be added to my top ten most challenging parables. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

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Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net