

First UCC Sermon on Matthew 25:1-13
March 31, 2019
Lauren Baske Davis

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But 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.’ ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Sermon

There are a lot of interpretations of this parable for preachers to draw from. Some have said that it’s all about being prepared, others have said it’s about staying awake, not in the literal sense but in the sense of staying present and alert to the world around you. Others have said, simply, this story is archaic and people don’t identify anymore with ancient wedding customs where the real wedding agreement happens at betrothal and the wedding is really a big party that starts at the bride’s home and ends at the grooms. A groom coming to get the bridesmaids to take them to his house, the waiting the bridesmaids have to do until the groom comes, all of that just doesn’t really have meaning anymore. Personally, I feel grateful to those who have wrestled with this story before me. But really, can you imagine a worse analogy to describe God’s realm?

Since when—I’d like to ask— is the realm of God about hoarding oil? Since when, is the realm of God about helping only yourself? Since when is the realm of God about being prepared, and stockpiling your own stuff and not sharing it with others, even when they’re in need? Since when is it about shutting the door in the faces of those 5 bridesmaids who happen to be unprepared? *How* is God’s realm like that? Knowing weeks ago I’d preach on this parable, all I could think was that this bridesmaids parable really functions as an antithesis to the rest of Jesus’ parables. I value that others have tried to find the good in this text. But I just don’t know if its worth defending, and I’m inviting us to work through it today.

Was Jesus having a bad day when he told this one, was he disheartened? Or was Matthew feeling pessimistic when he wrote it down? Is this what Christianity is about? Is this what we represent when we say we are following the way of Jesus? Is this what we do, amassing our material stuff to be ready, but if other’s aren’t, they’re just labeled foolish and are out of luck? Because well we did our part, and if they don’t have enough oil, well, that’s their problem? That’s bad news to me, but the gospels literally mean good news. Perhaps this is not the whole of the story.

Preacher Anna Carter Florence felt the same way and she tells a story about how she did an experiment as she was working with this parable for her sermon. She put this bridesmaids parable in conversation with other parts of Matthew’s gospel in hopes of redeeming it. By putting this parable with other parts of Matthew’s gospel, she thought, maybe there’d be something new that would come forth.

So, Anna Carter Florence did this experiment where she held this bridesmaids parable next to other sayings of Jesus. But each time she mixed the lessons together she found is that this parable doesn't fit with the rest of the gospel of Matthew. And it makes sense: Matthew's gospel includes not one but *two* miraculous stories where thousands are fed. This is the gospel that includes the sermon on the mount, the beatitudes that proclaim "blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are the weak." In this gospel Jesus says, if you want to save your life, lose it—give it away and it'll be given back to you. In this gospel, Jesus says "I'll always leave 99 sheep if it means saving one." No, I think Carter Florence is right. This parable of the foolish bridesmaids, as its often called, doesn't fit with most of Matthew's gospel.

Because if it did—if worrying only about yourself and what you have, and letting others flail about is what this parable is all about—then "the miracle of the loaves and fishes would never have happened. Jesus never would've lifted a finger for that hungry crowd prepared."¹ This can't be what the bridesmaids parable is supposed to be about. "Is the kingdom of heaven really no different than the kingdoms of earth where we do store up oil for our own survival [or domination]?" God bless Abby, who shared this story with children today because goodness knows this biblical episode of Mean Girls doesn't read well. No, there must be more here.

Why don't we take a look at ancient first century life for a moment. Because context. I found that while I was preparing my sermon, I became distracted by what ancient oil lamps look like. Have you ever seen a first century Judean oil lamp? They're tiny. They're these petite teardrop shaped things that fit in the palm of your hand. They look like a tiny flattened teapot with no lid. The wick comes out the little hole at the point of the teardrop shape, and that's where the fire is lit. The reservoir holds the oil, but again, these things are small. To make them burn well, you'd have to attend to them all the time, trimming the wick, adding oil, because if you don't, your lamp would get smoky, and burn faster, which would waste the oil.² Is that what the foolish bridesmaids did? that how they ran out of oil?

So perhaps this is not a parable about oil and what you do with it. Maybe this is a parable about what you carry with you, as in, a metaphor for what it is that sustains you. Notice that all 10 bridesmaids had lamps, but the wise ones brought flasks of oil with their lamps, and "when it was time to wait for the bridegroom, the foolish ones showed up with lamps and nothing to keep them going."³

If this is about the oil we carry to keep *ourselves* going, then maybe things in this story can fall into place and start to make sense. We know what it means for a car when it runs out of gas. You just can't drive it until you fill it up again. If you have every cared for a toddler, you know that not napping may result in disaster by evening time. They need to sleep. Perhaps this parable isn't a cautionary tale for preparation or storing up for yourself treasures in heaven. Perhaps Jesus was trying to remind us that its possible to run dry and that there are some things you just can't get by borrowing from another. That there are some things you need to fill

¹ Ibid.

² Rolf Jacobson, Narrative Lectionary Podcast, "I Love to Tell the Story," episode 356, "Bridesmaids (or Talents)" posted 23 March 2019, accessed 29 March 2019, https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1119

³ Anna Carter Florence, sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian in Minneapolis, accessed from Center for Biblical Preaching sermon series, 7 April 2009.

up on yourself so you don't burn out. The bridesmaids had to keep their lamp wicks trimmed and the oil filled constantly.

Maybe those tiny oil lamps and the parable of the bridesmaids are a reminder for us all in being loving enough, gentle enough, disciplined enough, kind enough, to fill ourselves up with that thing or things that bring meaning and spirituality to our lives regularly. The lamp needs oil, the car needs gas, the toddler needs a nap. What loving kindness do you need that you can fill yourself up with? If you can't think of any, maybe for you it's that thing that you always mean to do but just haven't gotten around to it. Because if this parable is teaching us any other thing besides the importance of what we carry with us, within us, perhaps it's also teaching us that our earthly lives are not infinite. This story occurs right after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and right before his trial and execution. There's no better time than now. What an apt story for our Lenten journey.

Let us draw our attention to the stones we've been carrying throughout Lent. Each week we are invited to take a stone to set our intention for the week on Sunday's theme. We've focused on forgiveness, God's generosity, and God's expansive invitation, each week taking a stone representing those themes.

Let me tell you a story about a stone. A pastor I know who does a lot of baptisms at his church puts stones like this (show) in the congregation's baptismal font that holds the water. He's been doing this for years. And he does it because he always invites the children to come up right before the baptism to bless the water. The children bless it for the person about to be baptized and then they are each invited to take two blue stones that look like water droplets—one to put in their own pocket, and one to hand to someone else in the pews as they go back to their seats. The "water droplets" are meant to be carried with people as tangible reminders that we are all filled with God's love, and that that love can't dry off no matter what you're going through.

So the church had a baptism, and a couple weeks later, a member of the church came to the pastor to talk. "My father had a heart attack last week," this man said. "We rushed him to the hospital, and while waiting in the halls of the hospital, I reached into my pocket and I had no idea I was still carrying it in my pocket. It became my prayer stone in that waiting time," he said. "Now I keep it with me on purpose." His stone was a sign of something that filled him, so that when it came down to this unexpected, jarring moment in life, he realized that as burdened as he was, the stone reminded him of love of God and the love of his community. And as a result, he realized he hadn't run out of the things that were most important even in the heartbreak of the moment. He realized that somehow, his lamp still had some oil.

Consider what loving-kindness you can give to yourself. Consider what it is that is really important in life. Carry it with you, because only you can carry what it is that you need most. Know that God surrounds you, loving you, supporting you, and wishing abundant life for you. And as you take a stone today during our closing hymn, may that stone you choose be a reminder to carry loving kindness for yourself. Let it be a reminder to do the things for yourself that you need so the lamp within you doesn't burn out. Maybe it will remind you to pull out those art supplies in the closet you love and always intend to use but always find something else that needs doing. Maybe it's a reminder to pull out a song book and dust off an instrument that you play. Maybe it's a reminder to read that book by your favorite author, or take a walk or connect with nature. Maybe it's a reminder to stop writing checks and instead get out to serving someone in a direct way that feels impactful and relationship driven. To make a call or

attend an event for social change. Don't let this stone be a reminder to do more. That is not the intention. Let this stone stand for loving kindness for yourself, which will inevitably spill over in loving kindness for others. Let it be a reminder of the meaningful spiritual fuel that sustains you. A reminder that God is all around you, wishing you a life that is repeatedly filled with oil. May it be so. Amen.

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