

Sermon for Proper 27a 2023

The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC

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Joshua 24.1-3a,14-25 Psalm 78.1-7 1 Thess 4.13-18

Matt 25.1-13

I will say it so you can feel free to say it out loud: this is a terrible parable. If Jesus is the bridegroom, as many authorities through the ages have said, then who is this Jesus?

Already in Matthew's gospel Jesus says:

"Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." (Matthew 5:42)

With this counsel, the wise maidens who withhold their extra oil sure aren't going to get into heaven.

"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." (Matthew 6:25)

Why, then, would we be thinking about how much oil is in our lamps? Does oil matter more than our lives?

"knock, and the door will be opened for you ..." (Matthew 7:7)

Could the bridesmaids have knocked instead of shouted at the door, or just grabbed the handle and opened it? Why not?

"In everything, do unto others as you would have them do to you." (Matthew 7:12)

Again, bad news for the maidens with spare pouches of oil. And are we to think that Jesus wants us to slam a door and not extend outrageous hospitality?

It's from Hebrews, not Matthew, but this, too flies in the face of biblical wisdom: *Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*

And there's this:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces." (Matthew 23:13)

I cannot believe that this same Jesus will act like those he has called hypocrites and will shut the kingdom of heaven like that.

A skilled negotiator says that "no" is the first step toward "yes." A Jesus who says "I do not know you" is an invitation to relationship. "Yes" will happen in time.

Now what? (coffee hour sounds good ...)

We remember, and New Testament scholar and teacher Amy-Jill Levine reminds us [that] the parables as told by a rabbi like Jesus are most often about the people in that day and what is happening right then and there in Jesus' circumstances. They are not to be over-spiritualized or allegorized. There is not a "moral to the story," like a children's book.

Parables are meant to prod and provoke us. They have a meaning beyond the most obvious one. The “now what?” question has an answer beyond running immediately to coffee hour. The “now what” is what is this parable prodding us about ourselves – not as if we are standing at the gates of heaven and trying to get in, but what is the parable telling us about ourselves right now?

Right now we are waiting for Jesus; we do not like to wait. I will take a longer, slower driving route if it means my car can keep moving over being at a standstill on an interstate highway. I am occasionally tempted to begin our service at 9:29 rather than wait 60 seconds until 9:30. I’m here, you’re here, I hear music, let’s go! I worked with an organist one time who apparently felt the same way about waiting. He started the opening hymn when I still in the hallway; I wasn’t even in the church! Like people in ancient times, we wonder and want to know when Jesus will return. So desperate for the certainty of a day and time, some people fall for such declarations, costing them money, their livelihoods and even their lives.

We wait together, decades, lifetimes, millennia. We all fall asleep. In the very next chapter of Matthew Jesus sees that his closest disciples have fallen asleep. “Could you not stay awake with me one hour?” Three times Jesus comes back to his friends: “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand.”

The hour is at hand. The hour is at hand for us to be prepared to meet Christ. In a sense, the ultimate commodity is not oil but Jesus. We are trying to prepare ourselves to meet the living Christ in this world. The party has already begun. Christ already died and rose from the dead.

This parable is not so horrible, after all. Matthew reminds us not to worry about our lives, what to eat, or drink, or even about the oil in our lamps. The drop of oil that is our faith, the drop that clings to the sides of an empty lamp is plenty for God to work with. We both live in and seek the presence of God who creates out of nothing, out of a formless void. What more might God do with that precious drop of oil that remains? This is hope: that what looks empty to the world is not empty to God. God sees deep within us and, as Paul writes in Ephesians, *God will do in us more than we can ask or imagine*. We have to know with certainty, not that Jesus will return on some date certain, but that Jesus is also with us right now.

We listen to our peril the voices of the world that say you need something more before you meet Jesus. No. We want to wear our “Sunday best” before presenting ourselves to Jesus. No way could Jesus love me as I am right now, accept us with faults and flaws and doubts and a very good practice of falling asleep instead of staying awake, of being fully present with Jesus, even one more hour. The voice we are to listen to is not of this world but is the voice of Christ. The voice of the world says you need more, now. The voice of our Savior says you already have what you need in order to live a full life.

A full life. Know that we need to fill our lamps, to build our faith with practices that are like oil in an ancient lamp. The Rev. Dr. Amy Richter writes about the oil that fills our lamps of faith.

[it is] prayer, reading the Scriptures, sharing fellowship and worship with other Christians, caring for people and the planet. And some of it’s probably a specialty oil blend: it’s spending time with family, it’s looking at nature’s beauty, it’s listening to or making music, it’s knitting, it’s marching, it’s writing, it’s baking, it’s building. It’s using

what God gives us to keep us going, to recharge, to stay connected with God and God's love.

We cannot “do” our ways of faith for someone else. No one can do the work of building our faith for us. Our faith is filled, refilled, lit and rekindled with those practices that work for and in ourselves. You cannot “take” my faith, and I cannot give it away like oil in an extra vessel. Faith doesn't happen that way. The Rev. Dr. Richter also reminds us that there is a reality here we don't like. We need those faith practices and disciplines. If you don't know some words of worship and scripture, she writes, “if you do not know some words of worship and scripture so well they become part of your bones, then someday you're going to be sitting alone with nothing to draw on when your own words fail.”

And in this world, there is a someday at which time does run out.

You cannot say forever, “Someday I'll spend time with my children, my spouse.” “Someday I'll get back to church, back to reading the Bible, back to praying.” “Someday I'll stand outside and breathe deeply and say a prayer of thanks to God.” “Someday I'll make that phone call, write that letter, make that donation, roll up my sleeves, and help.” Our time on earth runs out.

But here is more good news: we are still here. We're still here, hearing this parable. **Today** is not too late. We remember, that it's a party that Jesus wants to take us to. He's preparing a great feast for us. Whether it's the great banquet feast of heaven, or the celebrations of spending time with our Lord all along the journey there, we don't want to miss it. More good news, and it's the answer to “who is this Jesus?” Jesus is not just the thrower of the party. He's not just the bridegroom standing at the door. He's the oil dealer too, ready to fill your flask. Just ask. For yourself.

Fling wide that door, and join the feast.