

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
November 6, 2011
Matthew 25:1-13
“Providing a Refuge: An Oil Crisis”

You’ve just heard one of Jesus’ parables. It seems very straightforward: five foolish and five wise bridesmaids are described waiting for the groom to arrive so that the wedding banquet can begin. It is a parable about waiting patiently. It is a parable about being prepared, accumulating good works like extra oil for one’s lamps. It’s a parable about the Second Coming of Christ, emerging in all its glory as a time of welcome and a time of judgment. And it’s about keeping alert, watching for that day and hour as people of faith. There’s only one problem: in a real way, the parable is *not* about those things; at least, not as I briefly summarized them just now. So let’s start this sermon over again.

You’ve just heard one of Jesus’ parables, a parable about the kingdom of heaven. It is a parable about ten bridesmaids anxiously waiting to welcome the bridegroom upon his arrival. All the bridesmaids were focused on the task at hand. All of them had lamps ready to be trimmed and lit as needed. Honestly, no one was wantonly negligent here; the entire group was together and focused on their role as ambassadors of good cheer for the bridal party. So before we move to any pejorative judgments about half the group being foolish while the other half was wise, let’s acknowledge up front that it appears they were all committed to doing the work expected of them.

This leads to the first lesson about Christian life arising from this parable. We are called to follow Christ; therefore, it is important to maintain a strong focus on our faith amidst all the other demands of our days. In this parable, along with whatever other roles each of these women played, they were now primarily members of a wedding party with a specific task to fulfill. In our lives, along with whatever roles we are assigned to fulfill, we are primarily followers of Jesus Christ; called to be light in darkness, compassion in need, people of silence and prayer in a world of non-stop chatter.

First, maintain our focus. Here’s an example. If you visit the town of Saint John near the Bay of Fundy in New Brunswick, Canada, you’ll hear that long ago the sailors often found it difficult to navigate the water route that led safely into the harbor. So in 1849, at the harbor’s edge, they installed a trident shaped post that held three red gas lamps, whose light was visible three miles out at sea. If the sailors could see all three lights individually, they knew they were heading in the proper direction; if they only saw one or two lights, it meant they were off course and needed to make an adjustment. Jesus Christ is like the trio of lights by which we find our true reckoning and our safe harbor. Jesus Christ, as known by faith, worship, and scripture, is the one whom we are to keep our eyes on.

Recognizing when you are losing your focus is part of staying connected to the kingdom of heaven.

Our parable also talks about extra flasks of oil, something which the wise bridesmaids had with them but which the foolish ones neglected. So what does the oil represent? Is it a symbol for good works. Good and wise disciples do lots of things to gain God's love, while the foolish and distracted disciples do less; therefore, when the Kingdom of God comes, those folks without extra "oil" will be shut out in the cold. Gee, there's a crowd pleaser of a message! That is simplistic theology, something called "works righteousness," the false belief that God's love is something you earn and God only loves busy bees who buzz everywhere, staying beatifically busy all the time.

Let's not read into the parable something that isn't there. Both groups of bridesmaids were waiting for the groom to arrive, and at some point, both groups got tired and fell asleep. Half wasn't lazy and dozed off while the other half stayed busy knitting blankets for China or visiting kids at Children's Hospital; they *all* took a nap. The oil can't be a symbol of good works. To me, the oil relates to what we talked about earlier. It is a symbol about keeping our focus on Christ and on Christ's realm of justice, peace and love. It is about taking the "long view" of things, remembering that what we are doing now extends into the future; a future of God's own completion, something involving generations yet to come.

Think of it this way: Any gardener knows that if you want potatoes for dinner tomorrow, it won't do you any good to rush out and plant potatoes in your garden tonight. The transition from seed-planting to harvest moves through long stretches of darkness and silence, times of waiting and weeding and nurturing and planning ahead. That's the second lesson from this parable. To the extent that our lives are focused on God and the unfolding of God's realm, we cannot forget that we are doing things for the "long haul." We do the best we can now, by God's grace; and that means we carry extra oil with us because no task done well can be done quickly and soon forgotten. No good deed done as a disciple of Christ can simply be a quick fix or an easy, 1-2-3 process. Doing what is right, working for justice and change, raising up children in the ways they should go, caring for others out of an overflowing, compassionate heart involves planting seeds and waiting, tilling soil and weeding, nurturing plants and hopefully harvesting – whether by us or by those who will follow us. Wise bridesmaids bring extra oil; they have a long-term perspective. That awareness is not something you can simply give to someone else. That is not something you can pass on to foolish bridesmaids who don't think that way or aren't prepared for the long haul. Even if you could run to a store and buy some of this oil of patient faith, it wouldn't really be a part of who you are. It would lack integrity, authenticity, and so it wouldn't make you a part of the kingdom of heaven.

Which brings up the final point of this parable: it is a reminder about how the early church found it hard to wait for the expected Second Coming of Christ. How they were faltering in their faith and had to be told, “Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” So, here’s the big question: Is Jesus coming again? Is God going to totally transform heaven and earth? Short answer: Yes. Nuanced answer: If a perfect, eternal God is in relationship with an imperfect, finite world, at some point the imperfect *will* pass away. The finite *will* give way to what is infinite, and that is when God’s realm will be the universal reality.

Both the short and the nuanced answer tend to prompt a follow-up question: When will this happen? Honestly, I don’t know. But let’s consider this question from another angle. On April 9, 1865, Robert E. Lee surrendered his army to Ulysses S. Grant at the Appomattox Court House, which led to the effective end of the Civil War about three days later, April 12, when the Confederate Army of Virginia officially laid down their arms. How long did Abraham Lincoln get to enjoy this time of peace before that fateful night in Ford’s Theater? About two days. Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth on Good Friday, April 14, 1865.

All of you know that life can change in an instant. One day all’s well. The next day comes a cancer diagnosis, a car crash, a heart attack, a letter of dismissal at work, a declaration of war, an assassin’s bullet. Conversations about the Kingdom of God always use language that acknowledges the transience of life; how all will be changed in the blinking of an eye, how no one knows what tomorrow holds. *Without* that type of language, thinking about the appearance of God’s kingdom is just a mental exercise, a riddle we hope to solve so that we can simply get ready for it, stockpiling our oil at the last possible minute. But scripture tells us over and over, life is fragile and rarely unfolds according to our schedules. So we are to stay focused. We are to work for the long haul. We are to keep awake, for we *truly* do not know the day or hour of Christ’s coming.

It is foolish to expect an easy answer about eternal life and God’s in-breaking realm. It is wise to remember that we are to live life now; aware of the life to come, keeping that perspective ever before us, like extra oil for our lamps. That language is what provides refuge for our souls and offers real comfort.

So, you’ve just heard one of Jesus’ parables about ten bridesmaids, wise and foolish, like us; prepared and not so prepared, like us; hopefully now awake and alert, ideally focused and looking at **today** through the lens of God’s promises for tomorrow, like us. Right now you need something else to give you strength while you work and wait. Here’s a meal for you. Here’s a promise of grace, a reminder of a sacrifice completed for you. The bridegroom, the One you await is here now as host at this table. Rejoice! Jesus Christ, the One who was, and is, and is to come, invites you to join at His table.

AMEN