

St. Andrew's Cathedral
Jackson, Mississippi
Sermon for November 12, 2017 ~ Proper 27A
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As we approach the end of each of the three years in our lectionary cycle, the focus is increasingly on the reign of God. We focus more and more on the parables and teachings of Jesus that concern the Kingdom of Heaven, the arrival of the end times, and the coming of the Son of Man.

While many of Jesus parables and lessons have parallels in other gospels, today's parable is found only in Matthew. There are various reasons why that may be the case, including the audience the writers were addressing, redactors who came along at a later time and removed or added certain materials, or, who knows, maybe one writer had a better memory than the others. Today is a day when I wish Matthew's memory had caused him to forget this particular parable. There are so many other ways Jesus describes the Kingdom, aren't there? There's the sower, and the mustard seed. How about that lost pearl or hidden treasure? And the lost coin and the widow! I'd much rather preach on any of those than on this one.

This parable makes church people look really bad. Is fear of being locked out of the Kingdom really the motivation God wants us to have for living in relationship with God? Is this how we describe a wise person, as someone who only takes care of herself, hoarding the oil and not sharing it? It doesn't present Jesus in such a good light either; showing up late and then locking out half the invited guests.

This parable challenges most of the things I believe about God. It stands in contrast to pivotal stories and lessons. If taking care of oneself were the main message of the gospels, the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes would not have happened. The Parable of the Last Judgment in which those who fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited those who are sick and in prison wouldn't be in the canon of Scripture. Jesus would have left out the part about loving your neighbor as you love yourself.

Maybe my problem with this parable is that it hits a little too close to home. Like those wise bridesmaids, I do like to be prepared. Planning ahead, savings accounts, life insurance policies, self care, and budgets are things I value and recommend. I'll bet most of you do as well. I don't much like those bridesmaids who showed up with their own flasks, but the truth is that they look very familiar.

So, is this parable just a story that a Boy Scout or an insurance agent or an accountant could have told us? Be prepared, hang onto your oil, and remember only a fool gives it away. That sounds like Jesus has been having lunch with corrupt politicians, like somebody got to him. Is the Kingdom of Heaven really no different than the empires of earth, where we store up oil for our own survival?

We don't know whether the bridesmaids had oil at home; the parable doesn't tell us. All we know is that *the oil that mattered in this parable was the oil they carried with them that night*. Maybe that's what the parable is supposed to teach us. Maybe this is not a story about how much oil we have. Maybe this is a story about the oil we carry with us. All ten bridesmaids had lamps. The five wise ones brought flasks of oil with their lamps when it was time to wait for the bridegroom. The foolish brought their lamps, but did not bring additional oil to keep them burning. When your lamp goes out, you may have gallons of oil sitting at home; but it's not going to do you any good there.

So what does the kind of oil you carry with you look like if it's not a commodity we buy and sell?

There's a little exercise designed to illustrate the importance of those practices that promote a healthy spiritual life. A teacher lights an oil lamp and begins to talk about these things. There's a wick in the lamp and a little bit of oil in the bottom of the lamp. The teacher talks about taking care of our spiritual health so that we can be the light of the world for others. Before the lecture is over, the oil runs out and the flame ceases to burn. Then, the teacher asks what happens when the oil runs out. And the lamp illustrates that when the oil runs out the light can't continue to burn and we can't be the light of the world for anybody. Then, the teacher asks, "What fills you up spiritually? What replenishes your oil? What are the spiritual practices that enable you to grow in the knowledge and love of God so that your light can shine for others? What are the means of grace that keep you growing in grace as you continue on the spiritual journey? It's the spiritual oil you carry with you, isn't it?"

There are some kinds of fuel that are just not negotiable. When the needle on the gas gauge points to empty, you are going to run out of gas. If a two-year-old doesn't get a nap, he is going to be miserable. When an adult goes for weeks without a day off, fatigue and irritability are likely to be the result. When parents don't have conversations that don't involve carpools, soccer practice, or helping with homework, before long their marriage suffers. There are some kinds of fuel that are not negotiable. Eventually, inevitably, it all catches up with us.

There are also some kinds of oil you can't borrow from anyone else. Teenagers usually learn this; you can borrow someone's homework and get by on the assignment, but you can't borrow the time they put in studying for the test. There are some kinds of preparation we can only do for ourselves. There are some reserves that no one can store up for us. You can't borrow someone else's peace of mind or their passion for God. You can't say to your friend, "You have such a happy marriage, don't you? Could you give me some of that?" It doesn't work. You have to find it yourself. You have to figure out what fills you up spiritually and then make sure you have some to carry with you because you're going to need it.

Here's the truth: you will run out. Time will run out. "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 to take up painting again; I've always wanted to do it." "One of these days, I'm going to stop writing checks and really get involved helping build that Habitat House." We all put things off. And then the shout goes up: "He's coming!" It's time. And one of these days is today, and it's over, and you didn't have your flask of oil.

That's the hard part about this parable. The time will come when you have to draw on the oil you are carrying with you. And it isn't going to come from your savings, and it isn't going to come from your good intentions or long range plans; it's going to come from what fuels you spiritually right now. It's going to come from the means of grace God has given us – things like the Sacraments, Worship, Prayer, the Study of Scripture, Christian Fellowship, and Works of Mercy. All of those things that are put there by our Creator for us to gather like the manna from heaven all over the ground.

Don't fill your lamp because you're afraid you're going to get locked out of the Kingdom of Heaven. Don't stockpile oil because then you can turn everyone else away and that's so much fun. No, just stop at the filling stations God has placed along the way – those spiritual practices – fill your flask, and take it with you, because you can't wait to meet the bridegroom. You fill it out of joy. That's the only price of oil, when you think about it: the heart's desire to meet Jesus when he comes. And he does come. Not just at the end of the day, the end of your rope, the end of time. He comes – he is present – in every moment, in every decision, in every relationship, in every hope.