

OIL RESERVES

MATTHEW 25:1-13

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

One of the most important lessons one learns as a child is to share. We first learn to share with our brothers and sisters. I wonder if children who have no siblings are at a disadvantage when it comes to learning to share. Then we send our kids off to preschool, then grade school, and our children are encouraged to share. We don't want our kids growing up to be selfish, otherwise they will grow up to become self-centered hoarders.

That's why I am troubled with this morning's text, where the wise bridesmaids are rewarded for not sharing their oil with the other virgins. If I had been in the audience, I would have interrupted Jesus and brought up the Golden Rule and the story of the loaves and fishes. And what about Jesus saying in the Sermon on the Mount not to store up treasures here on earth, but store up treasures in heaven? And didn't Jesus also say something about not worrying about your life, what you eat, drink, and wear? Shouldn't we be willing to lend to oil to our neighbor, expecting nothing in return? What's going on in this story that Jesus seems to be encouraging hoarding our oil reserves and not sharing with the other bridesmaids?

The fact is, Jesus did say "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." When Jesus saw that the crowds were hungry and did not plan in advance he used a sack lunch of a child to feed thousands. So I really don't think the central message of this parable is about stockpiling oil and not sharing it when others are in need. There is something else going on here that requires that we look at deeper.

Let us first look at the setting and the characters in the story. The story of the ten virgins comes near the end of Jesus earthly ministry, shortly before his death. Matthew is writing to Jewish Christians in the church who had waited more than a generation for the return of Jesus, and some followers had become disheartened. Others were anxiously awaiting his arrival, trying to interpret the times, insisting that the days were short and the return was imminent. Still others were preparing for a long wait and were building up reserves in case the return of Christ was delayed even longer.

Although this parable looks to the future, it simultaneously warns against speculation about the precise time of Christ's second coming. The wise bridesmaids are not rewarded because they knew the precise time of the bridegroom's arrival and brought exactly the right amount of oil for their lamps. Rather, they were rewarded because they had prepared for the delay.

The problem with this little parable is that it doesn't tell us what the oil represents. The groom is Christ, and the bridesmaids are the church, but what exactly is the oil? All of the bridesmaids have lamps, but the wise bridesmaids brought extra oil just in case the groom was delayed, while the foolish ones brought no reserves. And you know what happened? The groom was late! He got delayed, maybe he got lost and didn't want to ask for directions. So all ten of the bridesmaids, foolish and wise, took naps. They all fell asleep.

The looming question for us is, what is the oil that fuels our lamps? A couple ideas come to my mind. First, Jesus was big into self-care. Not selfish care, but self-care. By self-care I mean developing a spiritually disciplined life. Jesus devoted himself to studying the Jewish Scriptures. By the age of 12 he was capable of carrying on a hearty discussion with trained rabbis.

Jesus was also big into the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting. Following his baptism but before his ministry began Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness praying and fasting. Even when he was exhausted physically, Jesus was able to tap into the oil reserves he had set aside when he was confronted by Satan in the desert. And later, during his three year ministry, Jesus would retreat to the mountains and other secluded places, spending time in prayer with God, replenishing his oil.

This is not the kind of oil that can be shared with others. I cannot nourish you, or you nourish me. We cannot hoard our oil reserves, but we also cannot share them. I cannot borrow the depth of your faith any more than you can borrow the happiness of my marriage. We have to fill up our spiritual life with oil so that when we need it, and we will need it, we will have plenty to spare, even if we have to wait a long time.

What oil reserve are you able to tap into when the bottom falls out of your life? Do you have spiritual reserves to cope when catastrophe strikes close to home? When a spouse dies? When a child falls gravely ill? When your house is foreclosed upon? When marital discord arises? When the doctor says you have cancer?

Twenty five years ago a pastor in Dallas, TX named Gerald Britt lost an 11 year old son to scleroderma. Last year another son was murdered. One week after he buried the second son Britt was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He has concluded that there is no feasible theological explanation that will help him understand the losses he has experienced. Yet, he says, "I choose to stubbornly believe that God

is good, and there are no qualifiers. I choose to stubbornly cling to that unqualified goodness—even when things that happen to me are not good.”

The time will come when you have to draw on the oil you have, right there, in your body, in your flask. And it isn't going to come from your pension or 401k, and it isn't going to come from your good intentions and your long range plans; it's going to come from what fuels you spiritually right now. It's going to come from where you see God, today. And where is that? Well, Jesus tells us. I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was in prison, and you visited me. I was sick, and you comforted me. That's where we find him. That's where we get filled up. Our oil reserves get filled up when we follow Christ and serve and love one another. We build up our reserves by spending time in prayer and fasting.

I think those church folk who use this parable as a way to scare us all straight are missing the point. You don't fill your lamp because you're afraid you're going to get locked out of the Kingdom of Heaven. You don't stockpile oil because then you can turn everyone else away and that's so much fun. No, you just stop at the filling station and fill your flask and take it with you, because you can't wait to meet the bridegroom. You fill it out of joy because you can't wait to meet the bridegroom when he comes.