

Oil For Your Lamp

Sermon preached by The Rev. Mary Keenan

Sunday, November 8, 2020, 23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 25: 1-13

Hear my teaching, O my people;
Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will declare the mysteries of ancient times.
That which we have heard and known, and what our forefathers have told us,
we will not hide from their children.
We will recount to generations to come
the praiseworthy deeds and the power of the Lord, and the wonderful works he has
done.

Doesn't that sound nice? Hearing and telling the story of God's love for us in a community of believers across generations? Who doesn't like to be part of a story like that? An intergenerational community like that? It gives you a place in the scheme of things, it reminds you who you are and whose you are.

During a week like the one we are in now, it is refreshing to be reminded that everyone is loved by God, the same God who has done praiseworthy deeds and wonderful works. It is a unifying story.

When plenty of us are figuratively hiding under our beds for fear of the broken communities and the broken nation we live in, remembering that we share the same story is like a warm blanket around our shoulders. The story - our story - has been handed down to us and we will pass it along to generations after us. That kind of connectedness seems like the kind of thing that might help heal our brokenness.

And yet, Jesus has added a twist to this story with the parable of the ten bridesmaids. And I want to ask, "Is that really how the story ends?"

This parable is really hard for me to like. Almost everyone I know is aching to feel more connected to each other, to have stronger community bonds. We want so much to know for sure that we are part of the same story...But this parable doesn't do that.

In this parable, the group of ten bridesmaids is divided in half right from the start - wise ones and foolish ones. It doesn't help that this story is not about getting through a rough day or an election week - it is about the Kingdom of Heaven. That actually makes it feel worse.

Didn't Jesus say the Kingdom of Heaven belonged to the poor in spirit? - Yet here the oil-poor bridesmaids are turned away for being a little bit late.

And isn't the Kingdom of Heaven like a vineyard where even the people who worked the least get in? And the grumpiest too?

After showing up early with their lamps and waiting all night, are these bridesmaids dismissed like seeds that fell on the wrong part of the yard? Just for forgetting an extra flask of oil?

Here we have a kingdom - a banquet, a feast - where many are invited and half are turned away, where half the people have the door shut in their faces. And the people who get in are like selfish, oil hoarders - which seems completely contrary to the Kingdom we thought we were waiting for.

I have to admit, too, that this parable bothers me even more this week because it feels like we are living in a country of battling bridesmaids. Everyone needs more oil in their lamps and half of us are not sharing what we have with the rest. On every front - politics, health, education - we are as divided as those bridesmaids with their trimmed lamps.

In some ways, just about everyone I know - myself included - THINKS we brought enough oil, THINKS we brought extra. And we are just now finding out we didn't.

Watching the news and social media is burning all the oil in my lamp. This pandemic is burning all the oil in my lamp. Being separated from all of you for so long is causing an oil shortage, for sure.

This description of the Kingdom of Heaven - where some people who show up and are excited about God get the door slammed in their face - flies in the face of the generous, hospitable Jesus who preached the beatitudes and taught us how to live together as disciples, how to survive hardship together. All those lessons are now culminating in a message to focus on our own lamps, our own stash of oil, our own entry into the feast.

At least that's what it sounds like, right? Is the same Jesus telling this story?

Well, yes.

The fact of the matter is that these bridesmaids have a lot more in common than the end of the story might indicate. All of them are waiting together, all of them have lamps with oil in them, all of them fall asleep while waiting, and all of them are excited when the bridegroom finally arrives. The only difference between them, is that some brought along an extra flask of oil.

Now it might be that they all had extra oil at home and some of them rushed out the door and left it right next to the face mask they picked out just for today. There might be lamp oil for sale at the convenience store that is on the way but not all that close to either home or the place they are meeting up with the other bridesmaids. Those resources are not available in this case, because when they NEED the oil it is the middle of the night and they are away from home.

So what, in the metaphorical language of the parable, is this oil - this un-shareable, precious resource? What in our lives is like the oil for these lamps? And how can we have a little extra to carry with us for an unexpected oil shortage?

There are a lot of ways to answer that question, to unlock the ancient mysteries in this story. The short answer is that the oil is discipleship. It is the habits and practices we undertake that keep our spirits lighted.

If you look back at the portion of Psalm 78 that we read today, there is a clue about this discipleship, the practices that fuel our faith.

The Psalm isn't just urging us to hear and tell the story of a loving God who does wonderful works. We hear these stories from our ancestors and tell them to our children...

So that they might put their trust in God, and not forget the deeds of God, but keep his commandments.

In other words, it isn't enough just to show up to hear the story.

It isn't enough to pass the story along.

We have to LIVE the story.

We live the story through prayer, charity, hospitality, generosity, fasting, compassion, justice-making. We live the story in our discipleship.

Discipleship is the oil in our lamps. These habits build up reservoirs of faith that help our lamps shine when things get dark, when we are are stranded, when the wait is unexpectedly long.

I'm pretty sure this is not news to most of you. At some level we've all been told and have experienced the way filling up our spirits through our discipleship keeps us going when the going gets tough. It's why we keep going to church even when getting there - in person or online - is tricky. It is why we study, meet, and give together.

Even knowing it, though, we all run out of oil at one time or another - all of the bridesmaids fell asleep. All of their lamps went out. It will happen to even the best prepared among us.

That is why it is important to take along some extra for when you need it most. We will all face a long night of waiting far from home - do we have enough extra to sustain us, to light those darkened lamps for the last bit of the journey?

The bridesmaids don't share their oil, can't share their oil - their precious resource - with anyone else. Turns out it isn't because they are selfish - you just can't give someone else a flask of your discipleship. And they can't give you theirs. We can learn and practice these habits together - but we can't give them to someone else. Everyone eventually has to develop their own resources, each has to fill their own flask with oil for the long night.

That's why we remember the story. That's why we hear and tell it over and over.

There is hope for those of us who are forgetful bridesmaids. Through repetition, the story about the Love of God becomes part of us, we can take it with us anywhere. Living that story with our bodies and our minds - It becomes a flask of oil to keep our lamps lit.

The habits of prayer, charity, hospitality... Those habits might look and feel different during a 2020 pandemic than in previous times. Sometimes you have to disciple differently. If your discipleship used to include welcoming newcomers or teaching young children about the faith, you are having to fill your lamp in a very different way now. If you used to serve God by literally putting groceries in the hands of a family in need or directly showing care for a homeless woman, you are probably grieving the loss of that person-to-person experience of love.

Yet there are still and always ways for us to live in response to the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. We have found new ways. I've been so inspired by the creative ways many of you have expressed your love of God and neighbor under entirely new and challenging circumstances.

When it feels like your lamp has burned out and you can't find that flask of extra oil, you don't need to come up with a solution from scratch. All you have to do is go back to the story. It is in hearing and telling that story that you will always find a reminder of the love that created and sustained all of us. Despite our divisions, we share a common story. We are all children of a generous, loving God. We share history. We share disappointments and traumas. We share humanity.

In that story is an invitation to enter and live the story with all those who passed it on to us and all those to whom we will pass it. We are invited to live that story of love with all of our neighbors today. And when you enter and live the story of God's love, your lamp might burn out - it will - but there will always be enough oil to light it again.

AMEN