

Oil for our lamps

(Matthew 25: 1-13)

I am often surprised by some of the commentaries I read when preparing for Sunday morning worship. It seems that these various students of the scripture are often taken by surprise by the parables of Jesus and their complexity despite their often written affirmation that parables are not as simple as they look. Today's parable about the ten bridesmaids who went out to meet the bridegroom was not an exception to this rule. One article discussing the parable began by calling it problematic, saying that the story was difficult. If one truly comes to any Scripture with the intent to engage it fully, it will be challenging, it will demand that you open your mind and heart because God's ways are not ours. That is just a basic fact about humanity and God. That certainly doesn't mean that the passage should be avoided. Instead, it means that it should be examined at many levels so that the entirety of the message becomes clearer. So where do we begin with this story of the ten bridesmaids who are so quickly divided into two groups—the wise and the foolish; the prepared and the unprepared. Before we enter the narrative itself there are two aspects of the situation which are not obvious to us that would have been understood by Jesus' own Jewish audience. In ancient Palestine weddings the marriage feast was at night, the bridegroom was met with lamps. This means the setting of the story was realistic. The bridesmaids in this parable have gone out in anticipation of accompanying the returning bridegroom who has gone to get his bride from her family. In *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* edited by Dr. Amy-Jill Levine a footnote explains the wedding festivities will not begin until his return and that exact time is not known. But the starting of any festivities begins only with the return. The second aspect of this story which does not usually occur to us as explained in the footnote is the association of oil with righteousness or good deeds which is found throughout the Old Testament. We usually overlook this aspect of oil when speaking about burning lamps, only thinking that it is a fuel; not as a source of light; light which is also often associated with righteousness which can be seen. So where do these bits of information fit into our understanding of this parable? What about the kingdom of heaven is Jesus telling us with this story of the wise and the foolish bridesmaids? The theme most often emphasized from reading this parable is a sense of anticipation about the coming judgment. Ready or not, like the nursery rhyme, the parable seems to say. The bridegroom, who must surely represent Jesus, is coming whether you are ready or not. Matthew, of all the gospel accounts seems most focused on the judgment aspect which will take place when Jesus returns. The ten bridesmaids all take their lamps and go out to what seems an appointed place in preparation for going with the bridegroom to the wedding and feast. All of them fall asleep while waiting. The separation into wise and foolish comes because five take only the lamp and the oil it contains assuming that the bridegroom will come within the time that the oil in their lamp will continue to burn. Five others, however, don't seem so confident about the time of the return, so they bring extra oil. While the ten all fall asleep as they wait, the lamps burn low on oil. When the shout announcing the returning bridegroom comes, the bridesmaids get up to trim their lamps. The wise had oil to add to their lamps to keep them burning, but the foolish did not. I suspect this part of the story causes some of the commentator's unease, the reason

they find the parable problematic. The wise refuse to share their oil with the foolish ones telling them they must go buy more oil. Those bridesmaids leave but when they return with their lamps now burning, the bridegroom and those who were ready have already gone into the banquet. The door to the feast is now closed. If the bridegroom had then allowed the late arrivals in, the discomfort of the commentator's would probably be eased. They would not consider the parable problematic then. But the late arrivals are not recognized or admitted. Thus, the urgent note to be ready when the return happens is clearly sounded and the parable ends with "keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Is this warning to be ready the message for us? We are often unprepared for what comes next in life, despite our almost constant preoccupation with the future. Sometimes a premature ending takes us by surprise. At other times, we are unprepared for something which takes longer than we had anticipated. In the former case, we think we have all the time in the world for what we need to do, whether it is to mend a relationship, achieve an important goal, discontinue a bad habit or begin a good one. And it is true that we might have this abundance of time, but then again we might not. One prominent Rabbi early in the formation of the Midrash, Rabbi Eliezer, taught his disciples, "Repent one day before your death." One of his students then asked, "How will we know when that day is?" To which he replied, "All the more reason to repent today, lest you die tomorrow." But in the parable of the 10 bridesmaids, the problem for the foolish bridesmaids was not the quick return of the bridegroom, but the delay in his coming. They were not prepared for a long wait. Some commentators take this as the point of their foolishness. They had tried to predetermine the time of the bridegroom's arrival. Jesus often points out that this is known only by God. By the time Matthew wrote this narrative of Jesus' life, it was becoming apparent that the immediate return of Christ which the early believers had expected had not happened. This parable reflects several concerns of the early Christian community. The scene involves delay, images of sleeping and of being ready. Early Christians expected Christ to return immediately. Even when the return was delayed they still did not envision the 2000 years of delay that we know has occurred. But Matthew felt the need to emphasize to them that no matter the wait, they needed to be prepared because Christ was surely coming again even if the day and hour were not known. But what differentiated the bridesmaids was not that some stayed awake in anticipation of the arrival of the bridegroom while others did not. The factor which separated the wise and the foolish was the amount of oil they had brought to the place of meeting. When the bridegroom comes they are not there because they had not brought to the place of meeting enough oil to keep their lamps burning.

Jesus, in Matthew, warns his followers that there will be a final judgment, that "on that day", the day he returns, he will reject those who have departed from the way of righteousness. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven." Here the foolish bridesmaids echo this saying, "Lord, Lord, open to us." This brings us to the consideration of that symbolic relationship between oil and righteousness. The oil in the lamps is what allows the lamp to give off light. It is righteousness and good deeds which provide the oil which then allows the lamps to give off light. The foolish ones have not responded to God's gracious initiative. They have come to the meeting place but have not brought with them the good deeds that the followers of Christ should have for their

lamps. Think of the many places in Matthew where light symbolizes what disciples are called to do: to be a light to the world. Also in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

The wise bridesmaids really couldn't share their oil with the foolish. How would you give someone else righteousness? Notice that within the parable there really no judgment of the wise bridesmaids for not sharing their oil. They tell those without to go and obtain oil. We often layer a sense of judgment or criticism on those who were prepared for not sharing something they had. But the bridegroom was not yet there, and they did tell the others to go and obtain oil. The foolish bridesmaids had some oil, but had evidently stopped obtaining it at some point feeling that what they had was enough. So, yes, this parable has many levels. And some of the message to us will make us uneasy, for as we follow Christ in this time so many years after this story was written, most of us have lost the sense of urgency that the return will be imminent. Because of that loss of urgency, do we perhaps put off some of the actions we know we should do as followers of Christ? Because we don't really live in expectation that we will run out of time to change our way of life, do we postpone changes? One thing we are talking about in this parable is living with a keen awareness of Jesus' return, an alertness tempered by preparation for the long haul. This parable also serves as a reminder that we are called to live differently all the time, to live showing that Christ's light is within us. These are things which we know. But the real good news of this parable in my mind is that no matter the delay, Christ is coming again. We can count on it. It doesn't matter that we don't know the day or the hour—God knows—and it will happen in God's time. With this assurance we are called to pay attention the ways in which our lives remain lamps giving light to the world while we await the coming of our Lord. With God's help, may our oil always be abundant. Amen.