

## “Got Any Oil?”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

6-30-19 Dialogue Church Sunday

Based upon 2 Kings 22:8-13, 23:1-3; Matt. 25:1-13

The New Testament is filled with parables that Jesus taught to help his followers understand who God was and how God wanted them to live. Some of the parables are encouraging, like the parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep. Some of them are challenging, but still familiar enough to feel like old friends, like the parable of the sower and the good Samaritan. But today’s parable about the bridesmaids is neither of these things. This one tends to be on people’s top-ten “Most Hated Texts in the Bible” lists. What are we supposed to learn about discipleship from the fact that the supposedly wise bridesmaids refused to share their oil? What are we supposed to learn about salvation from the fact that all of the bridesmaids fell asleep but only half of them were punished for it? How are we supposed to think of God’s grace if a simple mistake was enough to make the bridegroom refuse to let the five foolish bridesmaids into the party?

Professor of preaching at Columbia theological Seminary, the Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence illustrated how problematic this text is, simply by comparing it to the other teachings of Christ in *Matthew*. She wrote, “(Matthew 6:19ff) Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, although to get there, you will need large oil reserves, so forget the first part of what I said; store up for yourselves oil on earth so that you will have treasure in heaven. Or (Matthew 6:25ff) Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body what you will wear. Worry about your oil; that’s the main thing. Worry about whether you have enough for you, and forget about everyone else; they are not your problem. Or (Matthew 7:7ff) Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you, unless of course you’re late and the bridegroom answers, in which case you might as well forget it. Or (Matthew 7:12ff) In everything do unto others as you would have them do to you. In everything, that is, except oil, which changes all the rules.”<sup>1</sup>

You see the problem. This parable seems to contradict Jesus’ other teaching in a shocking and unloving way. This has led some to conclude that maybe Jesus never said it. Maybe Matthew included this in a collection of eschatological parables, that is, parables about the “end times” because he was trying to motivate his readers to stay faithful to Christ even though Jesus had not returned immediately as people expected he would. All scholars agree that the last line of the parable, the “Keep awake therefore” line was a later editorial addition because it doesn’t make sense with the story; all ten of the bridesmaids fell asleep! So, the scholars could be right about the whole thing. But today, rather than use Matthew as an excuse to ignore this parable, I want us instead to assume that there is wisdom from God to be gleaned from it whoever said it or wrote

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<sup>1</sup> Florence, Anna Carter, “*Filling Stations*,” Day1.org, November 4, 2007, retrieved June 24, 2019 from [http://day1.org/1065-filling\\_stations.print](http://day1.org/1065-filling_stations.print)

it. I want us to take on some of the sticking points in this parable to see if we can learn more together about faith—where we get it, how we keep it, and in what ways we can and cannot share it.

So, let's begin the conversation with the sharing, or lack thereof, because that is one of the really upsetting parts of this story for Christians, who are well-versed in Jesus' commands to care for our neighbors in need. Ten bridesmaids were waiting for the bridegroom to show up. They were waiting because Jewish weddings were multi-step processes that took days, weeks, or even years sometimes. There was a betrothal, which included a time of sealing a contract between the Father of the bride and the groom (treating the bride as property unfortunately). Then there was also a later reception-like celebration after the groom had gone to prepare a place for his bride. He would come and get his bride, and together they would celebrate the marriage. But this step couldn't happen until the bride's father OK'd it, so it could be a long time before the groom returned to collect his bride and begin the marriage.

In this story, the bridegroom's delay leads to all ten bridesmaids falling asleep. When they are awakened by a shout that he is coming, they prepared their lamps so they could be like living luminaria for the bridegroom. But the so-called foolish maids don't have any extra oil, and when they ask to borrow some from the others, the so-called wise maids say: "No! There will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." The Gospel in our minds calls us to share. So, here's the first place where we need to chew on the text a bit to digest it.

**“What are the things that we won't share out of fear of running out ourselves?”<sup>2</sup>**

*Answer: “Time.”*<sup>3</sup> Yes, we are all so busy these days; there is only so much time to get things done. Time is definitely a precious and finite commodity for us.

*Answer: “Money.”* Yes, most of us are good at charitable giving. But we always need to watch whether we have enough for ourselves too. There is always the fear that we won't have enough for our future security.

*Answer: “Love.”* Yes, so many people treat love as if it is pie. You only have so many slices to give away. They don't think of love in the biblical sense, as something that grows and grows, so there is always more to give.

**“What are the things we think we need to have or do in order to be let into heaven?”**

*Answer: “Be good. Do good things. Take care of others. Share.”* Yes. Although the Gospel says that we do not have to, and in fact cannot earn our salvation, many of us feel that we must do good things in order to qualify for heaven.

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<sup>2</sup> Individuals and/or the congregation were asked the bolded questions as a part of the “dialogue.”

<sup>3</sup> Answers were provided by Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean to give a sense of what the dialogue was like.

## **Are there times when saying “yes” to the requests of the world undermines our relationship with Christ?**

*Answer: “Materialism.”* Yes, if we get more attached to stuff than to God, that can definitely undermine our relationship. So can becoming attached to the values of the world which differ from the values Christ embodied and taught. Our world is a “me first” world, not a “neighbor or God-first” world. Greed and selfishness can lead us away from God.

For centuries people have debated what the oil signifies in this story, since it clearly stands for something that is precious, something that can be stockpiled, and something that enable you to shine and something you can lose. Some have argued that oil must stand for good works, but I’m not sure that is theologically consistent with the Gospel. As I said, the whole point of the Gospel is that Jesus saved us as a gift; we don’t earn our own salvation. So, if you have to do a certain number of good works to be able to get into the heavenly party, then Jesus’ death on the cross was pointless. I think that the oil in this story is faith, but not in the sense of intellectual knowledge of specific doctrines. I think the oil is faith in the sense of spiritual fuel grounded in our relationship with God. It is the stuff that allows us to shine with God’s grace as the light of the world we are called to be. If you run out of that kind of fuel, it is very hard to shine.

In our Old Testament text today, not only was Judah’s oil tank too low for the people to be a light to the world, it was so empty that the people had forgotten about God and the Law entirely. They were just going about the business of life like the Canaanites did, instead of being distinctive as the people of Yahweh. Then one day during a renovation project on the Temple that the good king Josiah started when he was only 18, the workman made a startling discovery. Hidden among the accounting books in the treasury part of the Temple they found the Torah, the Book of the Law. They didn’t know what it was, but it looked pretty important so they took it to the prophetess Hilkiah to identify. When she told them what it was and how displeased God was, they took it to Josiah, who was horrified that the people had become so unfaithful. He launched a major reformation campaign on the spot, reading the Law to all the people, tearing down the altars to pagan gods that had been erected, etc., resuming Yahweh worship and the sacrificial system and all the practices under the Law.

## **When do you typically fill up your gas tank—when it’s half full, a quarter full, on E?**

*(Hands raised for each. Most people answered either a quarter tank or empty.)*

## **How low do you go before making an effort to fill up your spiritual oil tank?**

We all know what it is like to run low on other kinds of fuel. As Carter Florence put it, “If a two-year old doesn’t get a nap, she’s going to crash. When you haven’t had a conversation with your spouse in three weeks that hasn’t revolved around carpooling logistics, your marriage is getting dry. If you have worked eighty-hour weeks for longer than you care to know, your

relationships are going to suffer.”<sup>4</sup> There is a reason that Sabbath-keeping is one of God’s commands, emotionally and physically we need to rest to refuel. Relationship-keeping also requires fuel. Love doesn’t run well on fumes.

**But what about your spiritual oil tank? Do you know even when you’re running low? What does that feel like?**

*Answer: “It feels like being overwhelmed. Sometimes I take on too many projects, and then I get too tired and stressed. But then I feel guilty because I am the one who took them on. Then I just have to retreat.”*

Last week I talked about anxiety and depression, both of which can be signs of low spiritual fuel. The more we are grounded in Christ, the closer we feel to God, the easier it is to trust that God will get us through whatever challenges us. So, it follows that when we lose that connection with God, the challenges can quickly become overwhelming. But irritability and apathy and shifting priorities can also be signs you are running low on oil, and you can run low without having been confronted by serious challenges. That is one of the reasons why God gave the people of Israel the Law. It was supposed to be the means by which they maintained their connection to their source of light and hope. It was supposed to be the means by which they remembered their spiritual calling. So, although worship and Bible study and service are not practices by which we save ourselves in the sense of enabling us to qualify for heaven by our good works, they can save us in the sense that they are means of much needed grace for us. They connect us with our source of light and love, strength and hope. They ensure that the bridegroom knows us and we know him.

**Of all the Christian practices, what fuels you spiritually the most?**

*Answers: “Prayer.” “Silence.” “Caring for others.” “Keeping a gratitude journal.” “Music: listening to it or singing.” “Worship.”*

Keeping active in a community of faith and practicing spiritual disciplines is a great source of fuel. But that raises the question—is it fuel we can share? We can share how to do the disciplines with others and should. But when we do so, it is the equivalent of giving someone a lamp, not oil. The hard truth this parable conveys is that the oil comes from being invested in relationship with God, and that is something that cannot be shared.

**What are some things that we can’t share with others but wish we could?**

We cannot give to a loved one who does not believe, the peace of God which strengthens us, as much as we want to; we can witness to that peace but not give them a piece of it. Likewise, we cannot give our faith to someone who loses his or her faith because of tragedy. We can

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embody it, but we can't hand it over. So, this parable is not saying that we should never share. It's saying that we can't rely on others to do the work of building a relationship with God for us. The only way for each of us to have enough oil is for each of us to tend our relationship with God often and completely. The only way to ensure we have enough oil for the long haul, and the dry spells of waiting and wanting the Lord, is to accumulate a reserve of experiences in which God and the faith community are by your side in a palpable way. Then, when your lamp runs dry, you will have a stash of oil to draw on for light until you can take in the light of the bridegroom again.

*Hebrews* says that "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen." (Heb. 11:1). That's true, but it makes it seem like faith is something you can purchase easily at midnight when the bridegroom is coming and you've been asleep. The truth is that faith is work. It's a verb more than a noun, a relationship more than a set of beliefs. No one knows when Jesus, the bridegroom, will return. But the point is not that we should never sleep because it could be any minute now. The point is that we will sleep because it has been and could be a long wait. Make sure you have the reserves you need, therefore, for your own sake, and so that you can share the one thing we all need more of, the light and love of Christ. Amen.