

First Presbyterian Church – Charlotte, NC  
November 9, 2014  
Rev. Pen Peery

**Reservoirs**  
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.

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So let's recap: after the bridesmaids who didn't have enough oil come back to the wedding banquet, they find the door shut. Later, they come to the door and ask for it to be opened, and the bridegroom says, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you."

What ever happened to "knock, and the door will be opened to you?"

If it were up to me – which it is not – I am pretty certain I would edit out all the parts of the Bible that have been used to segment the people that God loves and that Christ came to save into categories of “in” or “out.”

An unfortunate legacy of how we have practiced Christianity is that, historically, those of us who comprise the church have spent too much of our time and energy making distinctions between who is saved and who isn't.

Between who is included and who isn't.

Between who is worthy and who isn't.

And there are consequences for spending our energy on these things.

One consequence is that we have given a bad impression to those who are exploring what it is they believe by painting a picture of a church that is more concerned about defining ourselves by what we are **not** than what we are. And that is not a very compelling witness.

Another consequence of spending our energy this way is that we run the risk of convincing ourselves that the gospel message we proclaim is only about passing a test that will determine where we will be spending our time once our life is over.

But we know that the gospel is so much bigger and more beautiful than that, right??

So then Jesus hits us with a parable like this one – where, on a quick reading, it seems like the point he is trying to make is about who is in and who is out.

And if it isn't a parable about foolish bridesmaids it is about a great banquet and who gets the invitation. And if it isn't about a great banquet it is about separating the weeds from the wheat. And if it isn't about separating the weeds from the wheat it is about separating the sheep from the goats.

And if it were up to me, I would edit all of those parts out.

Because I think they confuse people.

And distract people.

And become weapons that people wield against the things and the people that they don't understand or know.

And that is not how I think Jesus meant these parables to be understood.

I think this parable is a lot more about recognition than it is about separation. It seems clear that what Jesus is eager to describe is not what might happen to us if we don't make the final cut, but rather what kind of attitude and behavior will help us recognize the time when he will come again.

We don't like to talk about that too much, I think...Jesus coming again. It makes us sound a little crazy. Plus, most of us kind of like things the way they are...so what's the rush? But Jesus leaves us with a promise...that he will be with us to the end of the age and that he will come again...so how can we be ready to meet him?

Since parables are stories that use an everyday medium to communicate a profound point it has always helped me to recast the parable using a more contemporary example. When I read this parable, I think about homework.

When I was in high school, I wasn't a fan of homework.

I'm a pretty intuitive person and could cram for a test with the best of them, so homework seemed to me to be a waste of my time – time that I could better spend hanging out with my friends, shooting hoops, sleeping...you know, the things that high schoolers like to do.

In most cases, this worked out well for me. I was a good student. I managed to make the grades I needed and learned a little something along the way. My parents, shaking their heads, would say that I was blessed with the gift of finesse – I would always find a way to get the job done in spite of the fact that I was flying by the seat of my pants most of the time.

My parents also said there would be times when this gift of finesse would be a liability, and boy were they right.

Here's a prime case study: for me, the most dreaded homework assignment in middle and high school was to keep a journal. It sounds pretty innocuous – write a page or two in a journal to reflect on what you had read for that day, or what you had learned that week, and turn the entire journal in at the end of the semester.

Yet for someone like me who had crafted procrastination into an art form, this kind of assignment was the death knell to the homework grade. I can tell you from experience that it is not a good feeling to realize that you have to fabricate a semester's worth of work in a marathon-all-night-session.

In fact, it is impossible to do that – something you who are teachers probably know. The journals prepared by people like me who put them off until the last minute seldom reflect much substantive thought – and the lack of preparation is transparent from the first entry.

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You might call that kind of procrastination foolish.

That certainly seems to be what Jesus would say.  
Five of the bridesmaids were wise. Five of them were foolish.

So, what does a foolish bridesmaid make?

A lot of people think that what makes the bridesmaids foolish in this parable that Jesus tells is that they fall asleep.

But when you read the parable carefully, you find that both sets of bridesmaids fall asleep.

The issue is less wakefulness than preparedness.

The foolish bridesmaids are foolish on two counts: they don't bring enough oil to begin with, and then, when the bridegroom is delayed in coming, they still fail to take the steps necessary to ready themselves for the arrival.

It is a pattern of behavior – not an oversight – that ultimately leaves the bridesmaids outside of the party and in the cold.

And who is to say how much oil the bridesmaids had at home? Maybe the foolish bridesmaids had stockpiled the stuff and the wise bridesmaids were drawing on their final supply?

This is not a parable about the haves and the have-nots – it is a parable about what the Christian life looks like when we are called to draw on our faith...when the time comes; when the moment arrives; when our voice is needed.

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So, maybe I am being a little defensive, as someone who has a pattern of behavior that Jesus might deem foolish, but it sure seems like the “wise” bridesmaids are persnickety.

Certainly, they are not very generous with their oil.

This kind of pinched attitude doesn't strike me as a kind of behavior that Jesus typically endorses.

I wonder why these “wise” bridesmaids didn't share with their companions? They said it was because there wouldn't be enough oil left in their own lamps, but c'mon...couldn't they at least give it a try?

Whatever happened to an attitude of abundance – where there is enough to go around?

Where manna comes down from heaven?

Where the loaves and fishes multiply?

Why draw the line so brightly when it comes to who has oil in their tank and who doesn't?

Is this really the point that Jesus is trying to make – like a divine Boy Scout, wagging his finger saying “Be Prepared” – and tough cookies if you aren't?

Anna Carter Florence<sup>1</sup>, who taught Katelyn and me in seminary and who is a fantastic preacher, offers these thoughts on today's passage:

"[As someone who is a mother, a teacher, a spouse, and a friend] I know what it means to run out of oil, and I'm guessing you do too. Your kid walks into the kitchen at 5:30 and says, "what's for dinner?" and you say "meatloaf," and your kids says, "what, again?" – and suddenly you have morphed into Godzilla, right there in the kitchen; and when you have finished ranting your kids looks at you calmly and says, "Let me guess. You're out of oil."

It's fairly simple. When the arrow on the gas tank points to empty, you are going to run out of gas. If a two-year old doesn't get a nap, she is 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 80-hour weeks for longer than you care to know, your relationships are going to suffer. It's not something any of us can avoid.

[Quite simply] There are some kinds of [oil] that you can't borrow from anyone else. There are some reserves that no one else can build up for us.

You can't borrow someone else's piece 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 for yourself.

You have to figure out what fills you up, spiritually, and then make sure you have some to carry with you, every single minute of the day, because that's how often you'll need it."<sup>2</sup>

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Where do you get filled up?

Where do you find the oil to carry with you – so that when the time comes...

When a visitor with a hunger for a relationship with God and the community of faith comes to worship in search of welcome;

When you cross paths with a stranger who needs to see the face of Christ;

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<sup>1</sup> Anna's sermon, "Filling Stations" (Day 1.org, 2007) has shaped my interpretation and preaching of this text. I am grateful to her for her good work.

<sup>2</sup> ibid

When your friend needs you to stop what you are doing and  
really listen to her talk about her pain;  
When YOU need to remember the joy that is the grace of  
God;  
Where do you find the oil to carry with you so  
that when these kinds of times come, you are  
ready?

I hope your answer to this question is the church.

But, I've got to tell you, I see a lot of church people running around with their tanks  
on empty.

I see a lot of church people running on fumes.  
Going to meetings, serving on committees, writing reports, making plans, showing  
up...but running on fumes – because they are out of oil.

And I'm not just talking about church people in the pews.  
I'm also talking about church people in robes and stoles.  
I'm talking about church people who are on church staffs.

Sometimes we come to church to seek out more oil for our tanks, but we end up dry

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And I don't know all the reasons for that, but I think one of them is because  
we miss the point of why God gathers us in the first place.

For all of us fall into the trap of believing that we are here to  
Provide a program  
Or fix a problem  
Or defend a truth  
Or demonstrate our worth  
Or raise some money  
Or carry on a tradition

But that's not it.

For God gathers us to this place we call the church – and gives us this Word, and one  
another – in order to fill us up and send us out.

Think of it as preparation;  
As an occasion to fill your lamp so that our light might shine.  
Because the time will come when God will call on us to bear that light  
in the world – and when it does, we should be ready.

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