

Plenty of Oil

Proper 27, Year A – Matthew 25:1-13

based on a sermon from Sermons that Work by the Rev. G. Cole Grubert

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Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

For the last months, really, we have heard a whole parade of Jesus's parables of the Kingdom. But what are we to do this week with Jesus's parable of wise and foolish bridesmaids? While it's not as well-known a story as, say, the feeding of the five thousand, or Jesus (and Peter) walking on the water, or even the parable of the lost sheep, this parable of wise and foolish bridesmaids is one of those that most people remember.

But what are we to *do* with *this* parable. It seems that it's not easy to be sympathetic with *any* of the characters here, is it? The bridegroom sends out invitations, but shows up *hours* late himself, and then shuts the door in the face of half of the guests. The maidens who get shut out are off trying to buy oil in the middle of the night, when the wedding is about to begin. Meanwhile, the bridesmaids who *did* bring extra oil won't share it, and come off looking selfish and, well, you know, a bit on the *snotty* side, I've always thought.

And what are we supposed to do with a parable that speaks about God closing the door to heaven? That much seems clear – the wedding banquet represents the joy of being in the presence of God. A while back, we heard another parable about a wedding feast, remember, in which the king sends out invitations to his son's wedding feast, only to have the invitations refused. Not to be deterred, he invites in *whoever* is standing at the street corners, and has a huge party anyway. Once again in today's parable, it seems everyone is invited to the banquet. So why this time do some get shut out? They all show up. They all bring their lamps. They are all ready. So while everyone else is inside partying hardy, why do *some* get left out in the dark?

Maybe, we think, the problem is their lack of watchfulness. The bridesmaids *do* fall asleep while they're waiting for the big event. And Jesus does admonish us at the end of the parable to, "Keep awake ... for you know neither the day nor the hour." But let's be fair – *all* the bridesmaids fell asleep, the wise as *well* as the foolish, yet half of them end up enjoying the wedding anyhow.

That leaves us with the oil. Apparently, the wise maidens bring extra oil, and the foolish ones don't. That sounds simple enough. But if we look for the easy answers, if we decide that the oil represents piety, or righteousness, or good works, or even if we decide that the oil represents *faith*, like a lot of preachers when I was growing up, we end up *really* on shaky ground. If we go *there*, then it starts to sound as though what's important is the amount of oil we're carrying around – as though we all ought to be doing *extra* good deeds, that we ought to be praying *extra* hard, that we ought to be living a more *perfect* life, so that we can store up a spare flask full of that midnight oil, ready to burn if the Messiah decides to pull some sort of pop quiz at the end of days.

But given the persistence of grace in Jesus' teaching – and in his *life* – it doesn't seem likely that that sort of piling on is where he's really going. The pattern of Jesus' teaching throughout the gospels simply doesn't support that kind of thinking. Instead, in *Jesus'* parables the invitations always go out to *everyone*, the pay is the *same* for those who start work early or are called at the last hour, and every servant is considered *faithful* so long as they don't hide their gifts away.

Likewise, it's not that the foolish bridesmaids are shut out because they don't have enough oil – after all, look at it again, their lamps are still trimmed and burning when the bridegroom's arrival is announced. They get stuck on the outside looking in, because they're so wrapped up in the possibility that their lamps *might* go out, that they run off in search of just a little *extra*. And in the process, the foolish bridesmaids wind up missing the feast entirely.

Ah, there you go. Right there's how the foolish bridesmaids got off track. Instead of trusting that the Bridegroom himself would provide *whatever* was needed for the feast, they run off here and there and everywhere, searching in vain for what they think they *might* need. They run off, hoping to find someone who can provide us something more, something extra, something that will guarantee our security. We run off, hoping to find someone who can take our scarcity, and our insecurity, and our fear, and wrap up some way to make us somehow *worthy* to be in the presence of the Bridegroom. And in the process, all us foolish bridesmaids miss the feast – and the *point* – entirely.

Because in clinging to the illusion that we can *ever* do anything to buy or earn our way into the banquet hall, we overlook the fact that the Bridegroom is *in* the miracle business. The Bridegroom is particularly fond of weddings, turning an ordinary wedding into a foretaste of the heavenly banquet when he turned water into wine. The Bridegroom is particularly good at making a little go a long way, defying scarcity with the abundance of the kingdom of God by feeding thousands from a little boy's lunch bucket. The Bridegroom is quite capable of keeping a little oil burning for as long as it takes. If you don't know the story of how a single night's oil lasted eight days, have one of your Jewish friends tell you about Hanukkah.

Perhaps if the so-called foolish bridesmaids had trusted that what they already *had* would be *enough*, they would have been there to greet the Bridegroom, they would have been welcomed with everyone else into the feast he had prepared for them, where the so-called *wise* maidens never even needed to *open* their extra oil, because that banquet hall was already lit as bright as the noonday to celebrate the presence of the Bridegroom.

You see, we want to focus our deficit attention so much on miracles of oil and water – the sort of miracles that defy the physical laws of nature – that we miss the Bridegroom's *greatest* miracles, those that defy the laws of our broken, fallen hearts. The Bridegroom wants to pull us beyond our ingrained expectations of work and reward, the idea that doing more *gets* us more. The Bridegroom calls us to abandon our nasty tendency to respond from an outlook of scarcity, to think and to act as if what we have is somehow not enough, in spite of the abundance of the gifts that he has given us, and given us, and given us. The Bridegroom's greatest miracle is to explode the foolishness of our self-absorbed, self-ish, self-reliance. Because the Bridegroom does *not* open the door to us because we do more, or because we pile up bigger reserves, or even because we have greater piety or more faith. He opens the door to those who keep their lamps burning... *for him*. He opens the door to those who have the faith to await *his* arrival – whether it's faith by the gallon, or one radiant drop. He opens the door to *everyone* who accepts his gracious invitation to enter the glorious *feast* of light.

“Keep awake therefore,” Jesus said, “for you know neither the day nor the hour” that the wonderful feast of the Bridegroom's love will be forever opened wide.