

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

SERMON
November 6, 2011
Matthew 24.1-13
"Got Oil?"
Pastor John Guthrie

A bride standing at the altar with her groom answers, "I do. Have your people contact my people to iron out the details."

Marriage has no guarantees. If that's what you're looking for, go live with a car battery. (Erma Bombeck)

Adam and Eve had an ideal marriage. He didn't have to hear about all the men she could have married, and she didn't have to hear about how great his mother's cooking was.

Jesus begins this story with the statement, "The kingdom of heaven will be like this." Like what? Like a wedding!

The story is more than a bit confusing without some knowledge of how marriages took place in the time of Jesus. Well, even if you know that, the story is STILL confusing. But it helps to know about Jewish weddings in the first century, anyway. Guests would assemble at the home of the bride and would be entertained there by her parents while they and the bride would wait for the groom to arrive. There were lookouts watching for his approach.

When the groom approached the bride's house, all of the guests, including the bridesmaids and the bride would go out to meet him. If it was dark they would carry lamps or torches. Then the entire marriage party would walk in celebration to the groom's house where the groom's parents would provide a grand banquet that would often last several days.

In this story from the 25th chapter of Matthew, there are ten bridesmaids who go out and wait for the groom. Perhaps they have chosen to be the watchers. Five of the bridesmaids bring extra oil for their lamps (the wise ones), but five of them bring no extra oil (the foolish ones). For some reason, the groom is delayed, and all ten of the bridesmaids fall asleep. Suddenly they are awakened by the call, "The groom is here!" They all rush to relight their lamps and trim their wicks, but the foolish maids are horrified to see that all of their oil has been consumed. They ask the wise maids for some of their oil, but the wise ones deny the request and tell the foolish ones to go quickly and buy some. But while the foolish ones are frantically looking for oil, the entire wedding party enters the house of the groom's parents, and the door is closed. When the foolish maids finally find some oil, light their lamps, and rush to the groom's house, they cry at the door, "Lord, Lord, open the door." But the Lord replies, "Truly I say to you, I do not know you!" Jesus finishes the story with these words: "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

You can tell right away from that concluding statement that Jesus is talking about the Last Day, the Day of Judgment. Indeed, this story is buried in the middle of a long discourse about the

End of the Age. The discourse begins in chapter 24, with Matthew's version of that end. As we have seen in other readings from Mark and Luke, all three of the gospels have these so-called "little apocalypses," and they all have some very strong similarities.

In Matthew's account Jesus tells his disciples to beware false Messiahs and false prophets, because they will come as the end of the age approaches. He says they will hear of wars and rumors of wars, that there will be famines and earthquakes, that they themselves will be persecuted and some of them will fall away. There will be betrayals and some will lose their faith. But, he says, those who persevere to the end will be saved.

People will flee to the mountains for safety. There will be suffering, signs, and omens, and the Son of Man (that is, Jesus himself) will come without warning and without notice, and he will gather his chosen ones from all the earth.

The disciples, then, must be ready, for no one knows the day or the hour, not the angels or even Jesus himself: only the Father knows. Jesus reminds his disciples of how the flood came quickly on the earth in the time of Noah, and how people were swept away because they weren't ready. A homeowner would not have his house broken into if he knew when to expect the thief. So in the same way, the disciples must be ready for the unexpected return of the Son of Man.

Then there are four stories, all dealing with the same themes, at the end of chapter 24 and continuing in chapter 25. A story about slaves who are faithful when their master is away. This story about the ten bridesmaids. A story about three slaves who are given money to hold and invest in the absence of their master, but who are held accountable for how they use that money – we'll look at that one next week. Then a fourth story about those who care for their neighbors and those who don't, during the time of waiting – we'll look at that one in two weeks.

All of these four stories have to do with how you and I are to live as we wait for the master, for the bridegroom...for the Messiah. They teach us what faithful waiting looks like.

With this reminder, it's pretty easy to see what's going on with the second story, about the wise and foolish bridesmaids: the wise ones are the ones who are ready. The foolish ones are the ones who are not.

But, in the context of this story alone, what does it mean to be ready? In its simplest terms, it means living the life that Jesus teaches us to live, while we are waiting. It means loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves. It means loving others in word and in action, as we love ourselves. It means forgiving others, as hard as that often is. It means being willing to take up our crosses and follow. It means turning the other cheek when we are abused, with the understanding that we are not to submit to continuous and hateful abuse. And so much more. Being ready simply means living in the way Jesus demonstrates and teaches throughout the Gospel of Matthew, and in the other gospels, too.

So what is the oil, which the wise ones bring in abundance, but which the foolish ones neglect? There is probably more than one interpretation, but one reliable understanding is that the oil is simply the faithful discipleship demonstrated by those who have sold out in favor of Jesus. That's why it can't be shared with the foolish ones who don't have enough of it. Relationship

with Christ is not something that can be sold or given to others. It is something that has to be developed inside oneself, and it doesn't happen without effort. And it doesn't happen with the expenditure of time. The life of discipleship is taking up a cross and carrying it. The paradox is that life is the most abundant, the most rich, the most fulfilling life there is. It is a life lived in the service of Christ, and in the service of others. So it avoids the empty nothingness of living only for oneself. So that's what I think the oil is: it is the relationship with Jesus that can be developed only with time and effort. It can't be given away.

I wonder if many of you have nighttime dreams, really closer to nightmares, like I often do. The details vary from one dream to another, but again and again I have dreams about needing to achieve some goal, get to some location, take some academic test, but try as I might, there is always something standing in the way. And when I overcome one barrier, there is another one, and another one, and another one. I have these dreams often, and I can tell you it is a great relief to wake from them and realize that they are only dreams. I wonder if the foolish maids feel something like that as they rush about, trying to find some oil.

Fortunately for us, the life of discipleship is never traveled alone. You and I always have the Holy Spirit with us, and in communities of faith like this one, we have other disciples to walk along with us. There are other bridesmaids waiting with us. And there is always the Spirit, so that our striving is not endless losing.

As we will continue to explore over the next few weeks, we are now in this time of waiting for the Son of Man to return. We believe that history as we know it will not continue as it always has, but that there will one day indeed be an end of this age, when Jesus returns. Atheists and agnostics find that conviction to be foolish, but it is a central conviction of orthodox Christian faith. The bridegroom will come, and then the celebration begins.

So we are to wait, not in anxiety and panic, but also not in nonchalance and indifference. We must not be pointlessly predicting the day and the hour, because we are instructed more than once that we cannot know them. However, those things that should be done in service to Christ, should be done soon.

There is something unsettling about the prospect that some will be locked out of the wedding feast, but the story is the story. Remember back in chapter seven of Matthew, Jesus says that not all of those who say, "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do his Father's will. How amazing it is that the unprepared bridesmaids cry at the door, "Lord, Lord," an echo of that passage from chapter 7. But the Lord does not know them. A rather chilling warning about the importance of being ready. The importance of getting it. The importance of living now for the living Christ. This is not saving ourselves by our works. This is simply living for Christ, in response to the grace we have all received, grace upon grace, blessing upon blessing, hope upon hope.

One commentator has summarized all these things in this way: "[This] text reminds us that this is not as good as it gets, that the bridegroom's delay does not mean he will not come, and that the party will not really start until he arrives. It asks us to live in hope for what has been promised and what will be but is not yet. It reminds us that knowledge, faith, and love are tools

for living in the time before eternity, not tools to gain entrance into it.”¹ That's the end of the quotation. Remember that knowledge, faith and love don't get us into the wedding celebration. That entrance is a gift. We are simply to be ready.

Got oil?

1 Mark Douglass, Commentary on Matthew 25:1-13, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds., Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p. 288.