

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

November 12, 2017

Joshua 24:1-3a; 14-25

Matthew 25:1-13

OIL RESERVES

Jesus was a great storyteller and many of us have our favorites of his stories. What are they for you? The prodigal son, the good Samaritan, the seed and the variety of soils, the good shepherd who goes after the lost sheep? If we were to compile a list of favorites from this congregation, I dare say that the parable we heard in our reading from Matthew would not be on the list. I'll admit that if I were to make a list of my least liked parables, this one found in Matthew would be near the top.

I've worked with a number of weddings and I am keenly aware that there can be quite a bit of anxiety about how smoothly the celebration will go. Of all the things that could go wrong, here we have half of the bridesmaids miss out on the whole event! They are with the bride, in anticipation of the bridegroom coming to take her back to his own home for a grand celebration. These bridesmaids, however, didn't bring extra oil for their lamps with them. When the bridegroom arrives later than anticipated, throwing everybody's schedule off, they take the suggestion of those who still had oil. They go out searching for an oil dealer to buy more oil. But in doing so, by the time they return, the party is in full swing, the doors are locked, and the bridegroom, who doesn't know them, won't let them in.

Whose fault is this fiasco? At first glance, I would be inclined to blame the bridegroom. He's late. You're not to be late for your own wedding! The bridegroom should realize that his tardiness creates a mess. Then, when half of the bridesmaids are late, as he was, and because he was, he won't let them into the celebration. He has set up this situation, and then takes no responsibility for it.

The well-prepared bridesmaids don't get off without criticism either. They appear to be selfish with their oil. More than that, they set up the bridesmaids who don't have what they need to light their lamps. The suggestion for them to go out into the night without a light to find an oil dealer willing to get out of bed to make a

sale is a bad one. Surely, the basic rudiments of faith suggest that those bridesmaids who have the oil should share unselfishly with those who have none. If they couldn't split their oil with the others, they could at least share in the holding of the lamps that were still burning, increasing the number who could be part of the celebration.

Yet the story doesn't appear to blame either the insensitivity of the bridegroom or the selfishness of the bridesmaids who have plenty of oil. Instead, the story leads us to the conclusion that it is the so-called foolish bridesmaids who should bear the blame for the outcome of this story. Does all of this bother you like it does me?

If this story wasn't one of Jesus', I would happily just forget about it. But the source of the story calls me and I hope it calls you to look a little deeper. That look starts with figuring out who this tardy bridegroom might be. Actually, that much seems pretty clear that this figure is symbolic of Jesus himself. The idea of a tardy bridegroom would resonate with members of the early church who first read and heard the Gospel of Matthew. They were anticipating that Jesus would have already come back for them. They were waiting and the times, like they were described in the story, were dark. The church was being persecuted and there were certainly doubts among its members whether they and the church itself would survive. What would give them a bit of light during these dark times?

That leads us to a critical second question in understanding this story – what does the oil symbolize? What can enable the light of those who are trying to be faithful to keep burning as they wait for the presence and redemption of the Lord? What is it for you? For some it might be hope that burns and illuminates. When it is dark, when a gunman walks into a church and extinguishes the lives of most who had gathered in a place where they had experienced the love of God and the faith community, would that not extinguish hope for those who survived? How can such a grief ever find healing? Lord knows we need something to give us light during dark times.

Yes, the Lord does know that, and a deep trust in God's goodness can help a light burn even in the midnight time for our souls. Isn't faith itself also something that

helps us move forward even when we can't see as much of what is before us as we would like? During the dark times for ourselves and for others, isn't compassion an oil that is greatly needed? So if someone would just give us some of that hope, trust, faith, and compassion when we are running a bit low, we would greatly appreciate it.

However, such hope, trust, faith, and compassion are not commodities that can be handed over from one person to another. No, it wasn't selfishness that kept the bridesmaids with flasks of oil from sharing with their unfortunate sisters who had run out. There are certain things that can't be conveyed in that way. Someone can copy down a fellow student's math homework, but the understanding of the subject matter does not come without study and work on one's own part. A surgeon might be able to successfully transplant a heart from one body to another, but that doesn't mean the original recipient's love or passion for life comes along with the heart. Parents can baptize their children, but they can't pull a portion of their own faith, hope, trust, or even compassion out and hand it over to their children for them to use as a resource. It doesn't work quite that way. And yet, parents and congregations can direct a child or a brother or sister to the good and available source for that high quality kind of oil that can fill someone's reservoir to provide light for their own journey.

When left to our own devices, we do run dry of that oil. However, when we are connected to the True Source, then we are graced with the spiritual reservoirs that can keep our lamps lit all the way through the darkest of nights. Then we will have what we need as we wait for the One who will bring everlasting light to our souls. The ten bridesmaids story probably isn't going to vault up to the top of the most beloved of all the parables as we have rethought this tale. But I hope it will be a reminder for us of our need for a light that burns brightly so we can seek out the One who generously provides the very oil for our souls. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered in the sight of God for the purpose of" what? The One who enables a covenant to be forged is the One who can marry us to our purpose. That is what can burn within and through us in a way that we won't miss out in being part of God's grand celebration.