

Matthew 25:1-13

I really have a hard time with this parable. Everything we know about Jesus seems to be turned upside down here. There is no symbolism of mercy or forgiveness in this parable. The bridesmaids all arrive on time. The bridegroom is late, and no one has any idea when he will arrive. The bridesmaids all fall asleep. All ten wake up when the bridegroom arrives at midnight. When they relight their lamps, they discover that only half of them brought enough oil, and those who did will not share, in fact they send the other half away to get their own oil; they show no mercy. While the five are gone the celebration begins with closed doors. When the foolish bridesmaids return, they are turned away, there is no recognition, no forgiveness. What on earth is going on?

In the chapters of Matthew, starting near chapter 23, Jesus begins talking about eschatology, the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. He has warned the religious leaders of his day who “do not practice what they preach” (23:3) several times. In verse 13 he says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (23:13), verses 16-17 “Woe to you, blind guides ... you blind fools!” (23:16-17), verse 23, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (23:23), again in verse 27, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (23:27), and yet again in verse 29, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (23:29).

The next subject Jesus addresses is the destruction of the temple, that it will be reduced to rubble, and what signs to look for that warn the end of the world will be coming. Of course, he says that the signs will be like birthing pains, just the beginning. Jesus tells them that there will be false prophets, persecution, and betrayal by friends. There will be solar and lunar eclipses, amazing and horrifying meteor showers, and finally “the powers of heaven will be shaken” (24:29). That is when the Son of Man will be coming on the clouds of heaven with power and glory. The angels will sound a loud trumpet call, and God’s elect will be gathered from the ends of the earth and from heaven (24:30-31).

This is the background for today’s parable where the 10 women are awaiting the bridegroom. Half of them were prepared and half of them were not. The five foolish bridesmaids represent the people Jesus has been criticizing in the past few chapters. Jesus has been warning people to pay attention to who he is, God’s son, the Messiah. And he has been telling them what the kingdom of God is like. He ends his parable with the warning, “Stay awake, you don’t know when I will return.” And our reading from Amos tells us it will be with “justice and righteousness.”

What does Jesus mean by “stay awake”? Well, all 10 of the bridesmaids slept, right? Yes, like us, they needed sleep to keep them alert when they are awake. All of their lamps went out, right? Yes, each one of their lamps went out. Then the bridegroom arrived, and we discover only 5 of the 10 have enough oil to relight their lamps. Only 5 of them are ready to immediately enter the wedding banquet. Jesus is warning us to be ready, be aware. Some examples of running out of oil in today’s life may be:

- A blizzard is coming. In the aftermath of a snowfall of 2 feet, which is not uncommon in this area, you discover that your neighbors have gas in their snowblower, but you do not.

- Most car owners have a spare tire in the trunk, even if it is only one of those 'donuts'. "Ah, so do I," you think— but you discover it's flat when you need it.
- Your favorite niece is getting married to her fabulous fiancé – you think "I'll wear my best suit, hanging clean in my closet"—but you discover when you put it on it no longer fits.

The five foolish bridesmaids had one thing to do: bring plenty of oil. This might not be as bad as running out of wine, which we hear about when Jesus attended a wedding banquet with his mother in the 2nd chapter of John, but oil is a common element, something the bridesmaids would have known they would not be able to skimp, and when they gambled by not bringing extra, they lost. Jesus tells us to be ready.

How can we be ready? It's a good question. Jesus tells this story and the parable that follows, which is about three employees who are given the task of managing company money. Each of the three are given a specific amount of money. Two invest wisely, the third, not willing to use what he had been given, buried what he was given. Jesus tells these parables to address concerns about his second coming, as described in Matthew 25, verse 31, "when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him" (v. 31).

In fact, the apostle Paul had to address this question of "How can we be ready?", especially in his letters to the church at Thessalonica. Some of the Christians in Thessalonica had taken the idea of being ready with their lamps trimmed and burning so seriously, that they'd stopped working altogether and were living in idleness. Paul himself answers the question in 2nd Thessalonians 3:7-8 by reminding his readers that "we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not be a burden to any of you."

How can we maintain a state of readiness? To live at the ready means that we follow what has been laid out for us in the 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel: We bear witness to God's kingdom by welcoming the stranger (vv. 31-46), by feeding the hungry (vv. 31-46), by visiting the sick and imprisoned (vv. 31-46), and by making disciples in all the world (28:19-20).

It's all there, most of it in the same chapter. Do these four things — actions that could fall under the category of loving one's neighbor — and you can be assured that when the Lord comes, there will be oil in your lamps. You will be at the ready. You will not be embarrassed before your Lord or your neighbors. You will hear the bridegroom say, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (v. 34).

All glory be to God.