

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner  
November 9, 2008  
Matthew 25:1-13  
Stewardship Dedication Sunday

### Trimmed and Burning

I have never preached on this text. At first, I assumed it was because I usually go off the lectionary on this, Stewardship Dedication Sunday. But then, as I dove into the parable, I began to realize that it is probably because I am not a big fan of this parable from Matthew.

Let me go ahead and tell you why this parable troubles me. First of all, at first glance, it is a horrible parable for a Stewardship Dedication Sunday. Of all Sundays, THIS Sunday ought to feature one of Jesus' many, many parables or teachings that talk about generosity and sharing. We do not even have to leave the Gospel of Matthew to find numerous passages about being good stewards of what you have. Just go back to the Sermon on the Mount.

It is full of Jesus saying things like "do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, ...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Or, "No one can serve two masters; ... You cannot serve God and wealth," Or, "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." I could go on and on. The feeding of the 5000, the parable of the laborers and the vineyard, etc.

Jesus has so much to say to us about how we use our money, our time and our talents, as well as about the danger of greed. And yet – here today, we have this story about the 10 bridesmaids. Five of them were foolish because they left their extra oil at home. Five of them were wise because they planned ahead and brought extra oil with them. And what happens? Well, the bridegroom takes a whole lot longer to arrive than any of the 10 bridesmaids had anticipated. But finally, he is spotted. The ten bridesmaids go to get their lamps trimmed and burning at full force to light his way. However, the 5 foolish ones immediately run out of oil. So they turn to their sisters and ask for the wise ones to share. To offer what they have. And what do the 5 wise ones say in response? Do they say "Why, of course. All that we have is a gift from God. We will return to God a portion of our blessings by sharing our oil with you." I wish! THAT would be a great stewardship sermon.

But, instead, the wise bridesmaids reply "No! If we give some to you, then there will not be enough for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." What? Surely Jesus is not telling a parable that subscribes to the myth of scarcity, is he? Surely he is not saying to us – in the kingdom, you are going to need to share everything but your oil. Surely Jesus is not telling us that the kingdom of heaven is like some giant oil conglomerate, is he? As my former preaching professor has preached, if that is what Jesus is saying then the kingdom of heaven is no different than the empires of earth where we store up for our own survival<sup>1</sup>. That proclamation just does not fit with all the other pictures of God's reign we find in Scripture. It does not fit with Jesus' other parables, either. Something else must be going on.

And besides, the parable says nothing about what the bridesmaids have at home, does it. As far as we know, the foolish bridesmaids had gallons of oil sitting at home while the wise ones were

down to their very last flask. We don't know because the parable only focuses on what the bridesmaids brought with them when they left their houses in anticipation of the wedding party.

So it seems to me that this parable is not about what you hoard or stockpile, but rather it is about what you bring with you to use. You can have all the oil you want but if you don't bring it with you and use it, you cannot light the way for yourself or anyone else. So perhaps this parable is about oil that you carry with you as you go out into the world, waiting for the wedding party to begin. That kind of oil is different than the oil on the news every day, the commodity that you buy or sell. So what kind of oil are we talking about here? What does this oil, the oil that the wise bridesmaids are unable to give, represent?

The 45 year old man never set out to try and carry the world on his shoulders. It was never a plan—something he anticipated or even realized he was doing. The feeling just happened. Slowly. Over time. First, he started working more hours, which meant more pressure at home, which meant that something had to give or he would go crazy. So he decided to stop getting up early to read a Psalm and pray. He was just too tired to do it anymore. He would pray at other times, he decided.

But soon after he made his decision, he found it was harder and harder to pray at all. Once you get out of the habit, it sure is difficult to start again. For one thing, his mind would not stop running. He would sit to quiet himself before bed and he would find himself making his mental “to-do” list. Or, he would find that he was making his mental “to worry about” list. Whatever he was doing, it was not prayer.

That's okay, he rationalized. I am still praying with the kids at dinner. And I still go to worship once a month if I am not working or worn-out. That should do it. But slowly, ever so slowly, he started to feel emptier and emptier. It was as if his heart had a leak in it. He found it harder and harder to recognize God's presence in his days. He found it harder and harder to think of anything but work and duty and responsibility and that he had to do it all on his own. The world felt squarely on his shoulders.

He had once been one of God's lights in the world—a lamp trimmed and burning. He had once felt truly grounded in God's love and grace. By getting up and praying, he always made sure that he had spiritual oil to take with him as he went about his day. But now. Now he felt like he was burning the candle at both ends and had nothing left to give. Nada. Zip. Nothing. Empty. He felt like a foolish bridesmaid, running around with barely any oil to sustain him. Hoping that it would be enough to last, and discovering too late that it was not. For the kind of oil he needed could not be given to him by anyone else. It was the oil that came with the work of spiritual preparation that he had let slip away. And now his lamp was empty.

“I don't understand how I have not burned out yet,” she typed to me in an email. “I am not sleeping very much and I am under so much stress.” She was emailing me from another state because she has gone home to help her mother die. Her mother has end-stage brain cancer. “She sleeps 22 hours a day,” my friend wrote, “but when she is awake she talks about seeing Jesus and leaving for a wonderful place.” Just reading her email exhausted me. How does she do it, I

wondered. I mean I keep vigil with many of you, but I have not had to do it with my own parents yet. I can only imagine.

But then, as I kept reading her email, I saw the first glimmer of her secret. “But you know what? It is just such a blessing from God to be here,” she wrote. “Every day, I am reminded that God has given me this gift to be with mom and my sisters at this important time. I know that God is with us every moment. Our prayers are almost constant. We read Scripture each day. We just feel grounded in God’s presence. Even when I am physically tired, I feel so spiritually alive.” Her email humbled me. Here was a woman who was watching her mother die, and yet her lamp was burning more brightly than it ever had before. It seemed that she had an endless supply of oil. Whenever she would start to feel low on reserves, she would open herself up and do the spiritual work to be refilled. She was refilled as she read Bible passages at her mom’s bedside. She was refilled when she cried and simply lifted her hands in silent prayer. She was refilled when her mother would wake up and testify to her hope.

It is as if my friend is being a wise bridesmaid. She knows she cannot sustain herself and that she needs to bring along as much oil as she can. And because of her constant spiritual preparation, she shines brightly for her mom, for her sisters, for her pastor back at home. She is being one of God’s lights in the world—her lamp is trimmed and burning for she knows the time is drawing nigh.

Perhaps this oil that the wise bridesmaids are unable to share is the spiritual oil that it takes to be the light of the world—another image of Matthew’s gospel. Perhaps this oil is about the kind of preparation we, as people of faith, must do in order to keep our own discipleship lamp burning. And as it burns, we can light the way for each other as we wait for the wedding party to finally arrive. And when it does, then we can light the way for the bridegroom, too, for we will be ready to greet him, lamps full and bright.

Apparently these days at Columbia Seminary, an oil lamp, like this one, is brought into the introductory preaching and worship class. It is used during the “spiritual life of a preacher” lecture. The lamp is put near the podium and lit. And as the teacher and students watch the light burn, the teacher speaks of how part of one’s call as both Christian and pastor is to be the light of the world. Everyone usually nods. That is not a big surprise.

But then, just as she makes that statement, the lamp goes out. She always rigs it before class by putting just a little bit of oil in the base. Well, the students notice the light is out so the teacher stops her lecture and asks this question: “What happens when the oil runs out? Well, your light goes out and you have nothing left to give. A pastor with no oil, a Christian with no oil, cannot be the light of the world for anybody, no matter how much they want to be.” And then they talk about how daily prayer and Bible study and communal worship are crucial for a Christian’s oil supply<sup>ii</sup>.

It seems to me that this parable is asking us some questions. It is asking us to figure out what fills us up spiritually when we run dry. It is asking us to really pay attention to the ways in which we do or do not open ourselves for God’s refueling and refilling presence. It is asking us

if we are prepared to shine brightly as God's lamps for what could be a long, long time until the bridegroom returns and the wedding party begins.

For the parable says that all the bridesmaids were originally ready for the party. And all the bridesmaids slept when the waiting got too long. But the difference between the wise and the foolish was that the wise ones were the only ones who were ready not just for the arrival, but also for the delay.

Are we? Are we ready to shine as brightly as we can for as long as it takes? Are we doing the spiritual work as disciples and as a church to make sure we always have enough oil to burn? Because we, like Matthew's original community, have no idea when the wedding party will finally begin. But we want to be wise bridesmaids – lamps trimmed and burning—when it finally does.

One last note—I realize that it is easy at the end of the parable to hear Jesus say, “Truly I tell you, I do NOT know you,” when the foolish ones, the ones out of oil, bang on the door. But I am not convinced that is his tone. Not the Jesus I know. I hear Jesus saying “Truly I tell you, I do not KNOW you.”<sup>iii</sup> I hear Jesus acknowledging a truth that we also know. When we have not kept our lamps trimmed and burning, when we have not spent time in prayer or in Scripture or in worship, then we do not KNOW Jesus as well as we do when we are prepared and ready for the party. And the more time we spend in preparation, the better we'll know each other when the party starts. And the brighter our lights will shine.

So...

Keep your lamps, trimmed and burning. Keep your lamps, trimmed and burning.  
Keep your lamps, trimmed and burning. The time is drawin' nigh.

Children don't get weary. Children don't get weary. Children don't get weary.  
Your work is almost done.

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<sup>i</sup> Carter Florence, Anna. In a sermon preached at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, KS.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. This practice started after I graduated.

<sup>iii</sup> Glass, Marci Auld. In a sermon she preached just a couple of weeks ago titled “Oil Crisis.”