

Keep Oil in the Lamp

Matthew 25: 1-13

There are just some texts that I wish the editors would have left out of the Bible, this text being one of them. There is so much here that makes me uncomfortable. First, do we really have to say “Wise” Bridesmaids verses “Foolish” Bridesmaids? I know that on occasion, I have forgotten a few things at home, things that I have needed for my job, things that I have needed for my kids, things that I have needed just to make the day go smoother. I have left them all right there, sitting right there on the kitchen counter as I hurried out the door. I’m not sure this type of action makes me foolish but rather hurried or forgetful but foolish....that type of wording doesn’t really sit well with me.

The second thing that bothers me about this text is-didn’t the wise bridesmaids ever learn to share? I thought everyone was taught how to share. I thought that was the whole point of sharing in the first place, to help change our mindsets from scarcity to abundance, to help us realize that even if I share from my little bit of resources, I would still have enough to take of my needs. I thought the whole purpose of sharing was to not stockpile resources so that only a few have everything and the majority has nothing. Isn’t that kind of the basis for the Kingdom of heaven? Doesn’t Jesus talk about sharing? That whole story of the five

loaves and fishes comes to mind. Surely, these supposed “wise” bridesmaids could have shared a bit of their oil.

And third and probably, the part that makes me the most uncomfortable and the most unhappy with this text, is that whole door being closed business. Didn't Jesus say knock and the door will be opened unto you? The bridesmaids knocked but then they were told that the bridegroom didn't even know them.

If this parable is supposed to be telling us what the kingdom of heaven is like, then are we suppose to assume that those late to the party, like these “foolish” bridesmaids, are we to assume that they will find the door to heaven locked as well?

This leads to all sorts of questions-what about grace? What about God knowing us as God's own children? Does the closed door to heaven negate all this?

Okay, before I start going a little crazy worrying about all of this and before I start getting all of us to go a little crazy worrying about all of this, let's take another look at this parable in its context. Let's look at how does this parable relate to whole of the Gospel of Matthew.

The Gospel of Matthew is the only Gospel which really focuses on the last days before Christ comes again. It is a running theme in his Gospel and this theme plays out in his vision for believers. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew focuses on

what it means to live out our faith through the values of the Kingdom of God. And the difficulties this often presents for believers because the Kingdom of God does not work on our schedule nor does it ask our permission when it will bring about healing and wholeness for all of God's people.

This is what Matthew is referring to in this parable. He knows that his community is tired of waiting for the Kingdom of God to be fully realized here on Earth. Matthew knows that his people are frustrated because Jesus was supposed to come back already and make things better. Matthew's community is losing hope. They are losing faith.

Because for Matthew's community, with each passing day, it felt like the Kingdom of God was farther and farther away from being a reality here on earth. With each word of violence and hate in their world, with each word of sickness and death, it felt like the Kingdom of God was farther and farther away from being fully realized here on earth. With each word of hopelessness that filled their world, it felt like the Kingdom of God was farther and farther away until they found themselves asking, What's the point? What's the point of keeping awake? What's the point of waiting for Christ's return? What's the point of hoping for that day when God's Kingdom will be realized here on earth and peace will reign? What's the point of waiting?

Matthew knew that his community's faith was beginning to fade and become stale, as they begin to wonder if Christ was ever going to come back and make things whole again?

In response to all that, Matthew wanted to remind his community that yes, Christ will return. He promised to do so. And yes, the Kingdom of God will be fully realized here on earth. Jesus promised that it would. It is just delayed a bit. It is may not be coming when they expected it to. And Jesus may not be coming back when they expected him to but take heart, he will be here, soon. The Kingdom of God will be realized here on earth soon. It is just delayed for a while. Just keep watching. Just keep waiting. Just keeping hoping.

And in the meantime, as people of faith, as believers of Jesus Christ, Matthew shared with his community that they needed to find ways to sustain themselves in Jesus' absence. They needed to find ways to enliven themselves, to enrich themselves, to renew themselves, both communally and individually. Matthew wanted his community to know that they needed to find ways to help them remain faithful until he comes.

And the same holds true for us today some two thousand years later. We still have the promise that one day the Kingdom of God will be fully realized here on

Earth. We just don't know when. So until that day, we are called to sustain ourselves, until Jesus comes once more.

Because as Matthew points out, there is only one difference between the bridesmaids, only one thing sets them apart from being "wise" and "foolish". All are bridesmaids. All are waiting for the groom. All have lamps. All fall asleep. All have oil in their lamps. There is no physical difference.

However, what sets the bridesmaids apart from each other is the amount of oil they have in supply to keep their lamps burning for the long haul. Matthew uses a play on words to make this point. The Greek word used here for lamp is related directly to the presence of God. And the Greek word used here for oil is connected to the act of anointing, which once again, becomes a sign of the presence of God.

For people of faith, the presence of God consecrates and empowers us. And through God's presence, we become the light of Christ to the world, the light of Christ for the world. And We can't do that, we can't be that if we run out of oil, if we aren't connected constantly to the presence of God in our lives and in our world.

In order to prevent this from happening, we as people of faith, we have to figure out what fills us up spiritually. We have to figure out what replenishes our oil supply, what replenishes the presence of God in our lives. We have to figure out

how to keep enough oil in our lamps to keep being the light of Christ to the world and for the world. We have to make sure we refill our lamps.

Now, here is the kicker to this parable, the part that really makes us uncomfortable, no one can do this for us. We have to do this on our own. We need to become responsible for taking care of ourselves physically, mentally, emotionally, and yes even more importantly spiritually. We must take time to replenish our supply of oil, replenish our supply of the presence of God in our lives so that we can keep shining, keep burning as the light of Christ for this world.

Now let me stop us all right there and say: Please don't hear me say that there is anything wrong with feeling depleted. All of us get that way. Even Jesus felt this way during his ministry on earth. However, when he began to feel this way, what he did was stop and take some time away with his God. He went on retreat. He recharged his spiritual battery. He re-established his connection with the presence of God in his life.

However for most of us, we don't do this when we are drained, when we feel depleted. Instead, What we do when we feel this way is try to find a 24 hour convenient store where we can pick up a gallon of milk, and a little presence of God on our way home.

That's not how the Kingdom of God works. That is not how our relationship with God works. The presence of God is not a commodity. It is not something we can pick up on our way home or even borrow from someone until we can make it to the store. The presence of God in our lives must be cultivated. We must become mindful of our connection with God and find ways to nurture it, sustain it, enrich it. We must claim and give importance to what feeds our souls, what restores our connection with God and make sure we have some of that each and every day.

No one can do this hard work for us. These are things we need to discover for ourselves. We must find ways to fill our lamps daily so that we can continue being the light of Christ for the world. Because here is what Matthew wants his community and us to understand: As people of faith, we may live our lives in this world but we draw life, we draw love, we draw grace, we draw joy from having, from experiencing the presence of God in our lives. And we know that is a connection we should never ever let run dry.

So maybe we reframe this whole conversation, and begin to realize that this waiting is a gift, a time for us to reframe our understanding of the importance of busyness because the truth of the matter is, we don't do the Kingdom of God any good when we are worn out and depleted. Maybe during this time of waiting, we embrace the spiritual practice of Sabbath, letting go of our feelings of guilt for taking the time to replenish our supply of the presence of God in our lives.

As people of faith, we are called to keep shining the light of Christ for the world, to the world And we can't do that if we aren't connected with the presence of God in our lives. So maybe it is time for us to take care of mental health, our physical health, our emotional health, and even more importantly our spiritual health so that we may always have oil in our lamps to keep burning, burning for Lord until the break of Day. Amen.