

November 12, 2017
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 25:1-13

RENEWABLE RESOURCES

This is a fairly familiar story to people who have come to church and Sunday School all their lives, but it is not like the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son or the Walking on Water or the Loaves and Fishes or a lot of other Biblical stories that are well known by those outside the church. One time I was talking to my brother—a self-proclaimed Atheist—about this story for some reason I can't remember now. He had never heard of it, so I told him the basic plot and he was like: "well what a rotten way for a bridegroom to act" (only instead of rotten he used a word we wouldn't say in church). He's like: "I mean here these young women have been waiting for this guy who is way late, they wouldn't have run out of oil for the lamps if he'd been on time, and he slams the door in their face. Is that the way the Bible teaches people how to behave."

I tried to explain that the Bible isn't really a book of examples on how people should behave. But you know, I try to explain that to people who know the Bible backwards and forwards and they usually look at me like I'm crazy. It's true though. The Bible is not a guide book or a rule book. It is the story of God and God's decision to be in relationship with humanity. Long, long ago, God made a covenant to be our God and our ancestors accepted the terms of the Covenant on behalf of themselves and all the generations to come. The Bible is one story after another of human failure to keep the covenant and God's constant, consistent faithful renewal of the covenant. The Joshua story Linda just read is one example in a long line of examples of human failure and Divine renewal.

Finally, God became incarnate in Jesus Christ and lived among us full of grace and truth, righteousness and goodness. And he taught us the way to live as the righteous people of God we were created to be. Sometimes he taught in parables. This particular teaching happens to be directed solely at the Covenant people. In fact, a specific subset of the Covenant people. That is people who have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Hear the teaching of the Lord.

Matthew 25:1-13 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹ But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' ¹⁰ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' ¹² But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' ¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Parables are not true stories. They're symbolic, they are analogies, they are allegorical. And sometimes it takes some intellectual digging to uncover the message. This story of the bridegroom and the 10 bridesmaids is one that can be particularly challenging, as my brother's reaction to it indicates. Clearly, the bridegroom is Jesus, but who are the bridesmaids and why do some of them get turned away? To answer that, let's start with some things that this parable is not about:

It is not about our being in a state of constant vigilance, never slacking up or getting drowsy while we wait for the return of Jesus Christ. All the bridesmaids fell asleep, the wise and the foolish. Remember back in the seventies there was a small sect of end times extremists who lived down the road in Lake City. They were sure

the second coming would happen within the decade and they always wore their Sunday best. Even mowing the grass in the middle of the summer. They must have been afraid to take a shower.

It is not about being the ones responsible for bringing the party supplies. The host provides everything necessary for the celebration. We don't need to bring anything with us when we go to meet Jesus. The oil wasn't a contribution to the party.

It is not about who has done the work to prepare for the party. The wise bridesmaids didn't get in because of their hard work. They didn't do the house cleaning or set up the tables and chairs. Again, the bridegroom is throwing the party here. It's not a covered dish or byob affair.

It is not about works righteousness. The wise bridesmaids didn't get in because they were good people and the foolish bridesmaids are not left out because they are bad.

This is not about a demanding, intolerant God who slams the door in the face of those who seek him.

And it is not about God establishing an in-crowd of those who believe Jesus is coming again and those who don't believe in him at all. All the bridesmaids knew the groom.

The distinction between the 5 who get into the party and the 5 who do not is that the so-called wise bridesmaids were prepared for the wait—not just prepared for the party. There is a difference. This story is about believers who are waiting for the return of Christ. The question is are you prepared for the wait, not are you prepared for the party.

So it is not a warning to the outsiders who do not know Jesus, it is a warning to those of us on the inside who call him Lord.

As the bridegroom is an allegory for Jesus, the oil is also an allegory for something else. There is an essential ingredient to a fulfilled life and you need to have your own. You can't just cruise through life without it and then, when the time comes that you really need that ingredient, think that you can just take someone else's.

The oil is the stuff that sustains the followers of Christ while we wait. The oil is hope, patience, and commitment to Christ and his way of living in this life. These can't literally be handed to someone who is lacking them. And you can't just give someone hope and commitment because you want to be generous. It takes the power of the spirit for someone to receive faith.

Of course I couldn't really explain all this to my brother off the top of my head in a telephone conversation. But it turned out I didn't need to. When I got to the part where I said Jesus wasn't really talking to people like you who don't believe in him. My brother was like wait, what? I thought the whole point of this whole religion thing was to scare people into believing in him. For about the 100th time, I said no, that is not remotely the point. The point is that God so loved the world he gave his only Son so the world might be saved through him. I'd like to tell you the Holy Spirit finally got through to him, or at least that it was an ah-ha moment that might lead to something else, but it wasn't. It's Ok. The love of God in Christ is for all people, including atheists.

When their faith and hope that the bridegroom would come was put to the test by a seemingly interminable delay, the wise bridesmaids had the resources available to sustain them. In life's joy and pain, ease and adversity, excitement and boredom, the faith of those who are prepared is enough to keep us going. We keep our light shining before others, continuing in community, study, prayer, acts of kindness, forgiveness and justice. We sustain the hope and faith that the world and each of us will one day be transformed and fully reconciled to God.

Unlike physical oil that gets pumped up from the depths of the earth, this kind of oil is a renewable resource. Relying on it doesn't emit greenhouse gasses. Like the wise bridesmaids—those who know they have plenty of it—will never run out of it. We have all of it we will ever need. That is the good news for those who follow Christ.