

“Oil in Our Lamps”
Matthew 25:1-13

*The bridegroom came,
and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet;
and the door was shut.*

The scene is a village in ancient Palestine,
and the occasion is the great festivity of a wedding celebration.

The whole village turns out for the occasion, which lasts at least a week,
or maybe longer.

No such thing as a honeymoon for Jewish newlyweds in ancient Palestine.

After the big event everyone follows the couple to their new home.

And there they stay, hosting a sort of “open house” for the whole village.

On the processional to the couple’s new home,
the bride and groom always went by the longest possible route
so as to receive the happy encouragement and good wishes
of as many people as possible.

There is an old Jewish saying: Everyone from six to sixty will follow the marriage drum.

And the Rabbis even agreed

that it was permissible to temporarily abandon the study of the law
to share in the joy of the wedding feast.

The wedding feast was one of the gladdest times in a family’s life,
and a time of great celebration for the whole village.

The bridesmaids in Jesus’ parable are waiting for the beginning of this great celebration.

The bridegroom could arrive at any time,

and in this ancient wedding game the groom earned extra points from the crowd
if he could catch the bridal party napping.

So these bridesmaids have to be ready to go at a moment’s notice

in order not to be shamed –
even if the bridegroom comes in the middle of the night.
When the voice rings out in the street, saying “Look, here is the bridegroom!”,
the time for the feast is now or never.

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Jesus says *the kingdom of heaven will be like this.*

Like the coming of the bridegroom.

And like the wedding banquet that follows.

The kingdom of heaven is like the biggest celebration you can imagine.

Like the happiest time in all your life.

A time when everyone comes together to rejoice...

and give good wishes,

and be merry,

and share in a tremendous feast,

and see dreams fulfilled,

and look forward to a promising future.

“The kingdom of heaven will be like this.”

Only a foolish person would allow herself...or himself...to be unprepared
for an occasion such as this.

But, as it turns out, some are unprepared for the kingdom.

And it's not because they don't know about it. They've heard.

They know it's coming. They've even received an invitation.

But somehow, for one reason or another, they've stopped waiting for the bridegroom,
they've stopped expecting him, they've stopped watching for his arrival.

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This is a parable about the *church*.

Not about the saved and unsaved. Not about Christians and Pagans.

It is a parable about Christians and Christians.

It is a parable about the members of Jesus' "village" – his disciples.

Looking at the wedding party,

it is sometimes hard to tell who's foolishly forgetful, and who's wisely prepared.

They all look like bridesmaids.

But some have begun to believe that the delay of the bridegroom is a permanent situation,
and they've fallen out of the practice of anticipation.

They've stopped paying attention.

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew there runs an urgent expectation

that the Son of God is coming and will make the world right.

When the kingdom comes, good is rewarded and evil is banished.

It is time of great rejoicing,

when everyone is invited to share in the joyful feast at the table of the Lord.

In some places in scripture, the church is likened to the bride herself, awaiting her groom.

In this parable, though, the church is the whole wedding party.....waiting and watching.

And some wait in readiness.

They are prepared to follow the bridegroom whenever he may come.

They have their lamps filled with oil and burning.

And they have extra oil stored and at the ready.

The very heart of this parable of the kingdom has to do with this kind of preparedness.

It has to do with whether or not we have "oil in our lamps".

So the question for the church – at the beginning of the 21st century –

as we seek to wait faithfully for the coming of the kingdom becomes,

"is there oil in our lamps"?

How do we in the Christian community keep our lamps burning?

How do we watch with eager anticipation for the coming of our bridegroom,

the Son of God who returns when we least expect it

and announces that the time of celebration has come?

The church has given a lot of answers to this question down through the ages...

- Some have said that the “oil” is spiritual piety – that is, the practices of Christian faithfulness.
The spiritual disciplines, as we sometimes call them.
Things like prayer, and study, and worship, and the sacraments, and acts of forgiveness and reconciliation, and the discipline of stewardship of the gifts we’ve been given.
These are outward habits of readiness.
- Others have said the important thing is love – love that endures to the end.
Love for the Lord your God, and love for your neighbor as yourself.
Just before this parable in Matthew, Jesus speaks about ‘the end’ and says that
*many will fall away, and they will betray one another...
and because of the increase of lawlessness,
the love of many will grow cold.
But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*”
- Still others look elsewhere in the gospel and say that the “oil” must be good works...
...just listen to the Sermon on the Mount,
where Jesus tells us to ‘let our lights shine
so people will see our good works and glorify God’.
...and the story of the wise and foolish builders –
the “foundation” of their houses is whether they *do*, or do not *do*,
what Jesus teaches.
...then, Jesus says, there are those who will call him ‘Lord, Lord’ –
those who have the right speech, the right talk,
but only the one who *does* the will of his Father in heaven
will enter the kingdom.

...and shortly after this parable of the bridesmaids,
we hear the shocking story
that always shakes us loose from our complacency,
the story of the sheep and the goats:
“Truly I tell you, just as you *did* it to one of the least of these...
you did it to me.”

Those who say readiness has to do with doing good works,
deeds of love and mercy that pay special attention to the “least of these”,
can make a good case from scripture.

- But Martin Luther, father of the Protestant Reformation –
trying to save us from the anxiety that comes from
depending on our good works for salvation –
said that the “oil” is faith.

Having oil in your lamp, and in your flask, means
having faith that God will grant us salvation.

Not a bad answer – an answer that was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation...
we are saved by grace through faith alone...but it does leave one wondering,
‘how much faith is enough?’

Even the foolish bridesmaids had oil in their lamps,
but they didn’t have any extra oil in their flasks.

If faith is all we need, then when can we be assured that we have *enough* faith on reserve
to last until the end?

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This troubling question of ‘how much is enough’
could be enough to lead us into a life of terrible anxiety,
and compulsive religious striving and church programming and “institution-ing”
trying to be sure that we have enough, or are doing enough, of ‘whatever’

to be ready for the kingdom,
lest we be left out in the dark with our lamps about to burn out.

Perhaps there's only a fine line between eager anticipation of the kingdom
and frantic anxiety about our preparedness.

But if the gospel is truly good news,
then it seems that its fruit should be joy rather than fear, and peace rather than worry.

On the other hand, a mere casual glance at middle-class American religion
reveals a great deal of complacency.

There is a widespread apathy about whether our lamps are burning brightly enough
for us to recognize the kingdom when it breaks into our world.

Perhaps a little anxiety could be a good and productive thing
for a people who are waiting and hoping for the coming
of Holy God of heaven and earth!

So we stand in the middle between two temptations –
the temptation to excessive religious anxiety on the one hand,
and the temptation to foolish, unprepared complacency on the other.

Either hand-wringing worry about how much oil we have in our lamps,
or a casual, shoulder-shrugging, disregard for God's invitation to share in the feast
that is to come.

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But the good news of the Gospel that Jesus came to proclaim
is that we do not have to give in to either of these temptations.

We do not have to give in to the temptation to *anxiety*
or the temptation to *complacency*.

When we grasp, or when we are grasped by, the message of the gospel,

we discover that the question of “how much is enough”
is the wrong question for Christians to ask.

We don't have to worry about how much faith is enough,
how much love is enough,
how many good deeds are enough,
how many spiritual disciplines are enough –

because the love and mercy of God are enough for us.

God's grace is big enough – amazing enough – to gather us all into the wedding banquet.

We have received an invitation! We are members of the wedding party!

It is Christ's invitation alone that is sufficient for us
to become a member of the family of God
and share in the celebration of the ages.

And when we grasp, or are grasped by, the message of this gospel

we will no longer be content to live in the world
as if we are not members of this wedding party.

Complacency is not an option

for those whose hearts have tasted the first fruits of the kingdom.

Their eyes strain ahead for a glimpse of the bridegroom and the joy of his coming.

A hopeful readiness is always present in those

who have enjoyed a foretaste of the feast that is yet to come.

Sometimes the flame will flicker and grow dim.

Faith will be tested.

Love will be tainted by the sin that is still at work in the world.

Worship will, from time to time, feel like a drab going-through-the-motions.

Passion for good deeds will wax and wane.

Longing eyes will grow weary from the strain.

But those whose hearts have been gladdened by the good news

that the bridegroom is coming

will persevere until the end.

It is that perseverance...

...that keeping-on even when night around us become pitch black...

...that steadfastness that reflects the steadfastness of the One who is coming...

it is that perseverance

that will make us ready when we hear the happy shout,

‘The bridegroom has come!’

and in God’s infinite mercy we are welcomed into

the celebration of the ages.

And it is that perseverance

that will keep our eyes open to catch those glimpses of the kingdom

that happen all around us even now...

moments of compassion from one tired villager to another

words of forgiveness and acts of reconciliation you never thought possible

the burst of color and beauty in the creation which survives despite our neglect

the joy of human love, brother sister parent child and friend.

the agreement of nations about what is right and good.

These moments offer us a foretaste of the great feast that is being prepared.

Let us wait and watch together, and take heart.

The bridegroom is coming.

Amen.