

Proper 27A 2020 Sermon

Matthew 25:1-13 (NAB)

Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones, when taking their lamps, brought no oil with them, but the wise brought flasks of oil with their lamps. Since the bridegroom was long delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight, there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all those virgins got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise ones replied, 'No, for there may not be enough for us and you. Go instead to the merchants and buy some for yourselves.' While they went off to buy it, the bridegroom came and those who were ready went into the wedding feast with him. Then the door was locked. Afterwards the other virgins came and said, 'Lord, Lord, open the door for us!' But he said in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, I do not know you.' Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

I don't know about you, but I can certainly identify with those virgins in our parable whose oil was running out. What with the resurgence of the pandemic in our nation, state, and county; the social distancing and isolation which we have endured for 8 long months; the staggering toll of deaths and illnesses (both physical and mental) and loss of jobs and income caused by the virus; the record-setting fires and hurricanes of this past summer; the appalling killing of George Floyd and others and the subsequent protests and unrest across our nation; the incessant, angry rhetoric, partisan divisiveness, and propagation of distrust throughout this long election season; and then the protracted counting of votes and the threat of legal challenges to the results of the election; it is **easy** to feel spent, drained of energy and patience and emotional resources. It can feel, at times, like the very fuel for our life's lamp, our life's light and warmth and vitality, is running out.

Our Gospel lesson today is one more parable about the kingdom of heaven among the *several* kingdom parables we have heard Jesus tell over the past months. Four Sundays ago, we heard Jesus tell a parable about a wedding banquet, wherein a king's servants were sent out into the streets to invite *everyone* to the wedding banquet of the king's son. But there was one guest who was not wearing a wedding garment, and that guest was excluded from the banquet. In my sermon that Sunday, I suggested that the "wedding garment" was actually a bridal gown, which symbolized one's readiness to join in union with Christ. I said that the wedding garment signaled a readiness to understand and act on Jesus' teachings; to take Jesus' teachings into our own hearts, thoughts, and actions. The Bridegroom is Christ, and those of us who would *follow* Christ must marry the divine revelation and bear children: acts of justice, compassion, and love in the world. If we do *not* do this, then we are living outside the wedding banquet; we

do not reside within the kingdom of heaven; we are not prepared to become one with Christ, the Bridegroom.

The imagery is similar in *today's* parable: each of the ten virgins intends to marry the Bridegroom, Christ. Whereas in the parable of the wedding banquet *wearing a wedding garment* symbolized one's inner readiness to marry the Bridegroom, in *today's* parable, the inner readiness to marry the Bridegroom, Christ, is symbolized by having enough oil stored up for one's lamp, so that one might see and recognize and greet the Bridegroom, even when the night is dark and long.

And, my friends, we all know that there has, *indeed*, been a metaphorical darkness in the kingdom of this world over these past long months. That is why it is so important for those of us who want to be followers of Jesus – virgins prepared to marry the Bridegroom who comes into the midst of our darkness – it is so important for us to have stored up enough oil so that we can see and recognize and greet the Bridegroom who comes, sometimes veiled, into the midst of a prolonged darkness in this world. It is important for us to store up reserves of faith and hope and love in our souls, by continually seeking the presence of, and union with, Christ.

Now, it may seem to us, at first, that the wise virgins in our parable are *selfish* in not sharing their oil with the foolish ones. But if we see the oil as our own personal reservoir of faith, it makes sense. John Shea writes: “The truth of oil is: you have to have your own. Although everyone has a lamp of consciousness, each person must supply oil from their own living out of the teachings of Christ. One cannot develop spiritually by taking the consciousness and action of another [person] as your own.”¹ No one can do my spiritual growing *for* me, any more than my parents could do my *physical* growing for me when I was a child.

John Shea quotes the Seventh-Century Saint Isaac of Nineveh, who said, “‘There is a love like a small lamp, fed by oil, which goes out when the oil is ended; or like a rain-fed stream which goes dry, when rain no longer feeds it. But there is [also] a love, like a spring gushing from the earth, never to be exhausted.’ The wise virgins are in touch with the inexhaustible river. So the oil is continuously replenished rather than consumed. The foolish do not know the way of individually maturing into a new person in Christ. They only know the way of ‘going and buying,’ looking outside themselves for what they need... In the first feeding [story] in the Gospel of Mark (6:30-44), the disciples tell Jesus to send the crowds away so they can ‘go... and buy’ (v. 36) food for themselves. When Jesus tells [his disciples that they *themselves* should] provide the food, the disciples say, ‘Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to [all these people] to eat?’ (v. 37). Jesus directs them to their own inner resources, but they insist that the only place they can get food is outside themselves.”²

In my sermon last week, I said that All Saints’ Day reminds us that our true identity is **not** to be found “out there,” over-identifying with our political party or

candidate or nation or ethnic group or whatever. That's **not** who we *truly* are. Our **true** identity is who we are in Christ. And yet, so much of the time, if you are like me, we live as if our identity is found "out there." We "hitch our wagon to a star" who is not Christ, and when that star fades or runs out of oil (so to speak), we are left with no **inner** reservoir to draw upon, no oil for our lamp.

In Richard Rohr's daily devotional this past Thursday, Richard quoted the Rev. Wes Granberg-Michaelson, who wrote, "Our temptation is to *begin* with politics and then try to figure out how religion can fit in. We start with the accepted parameters of political debate and, whether we find ourselves on the left or the right, we use religion to justify and bolster our existing commitments. . . .

"But what if we make the inward journey our starting point? What if we recognize that our engagement in politics should be rooted in our participation in the Trinitarian flow of God's love? Then everything changes. We are no longer guided or constrained by what we think is politically possible, but are compelled by what we know is most real. At the heart of all creation, the mutual love within the Trinity overflows to embrace all of life. We are invited to participate in the transforming power of this love. There we discover the ground of our being, centering all our life and action."³ (unquote)

Can you and I do that? Make the inward journey – our union with Christ in love – our *starting* point, the ground of our being, the Source from which our outward lives flows? Can we hitch our wagons to the inexhaustible source of oil for our life's lamp?

AMEN

1 John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p.315

2 Shea, *ibid.*

3 "Mysticism Precedes Politics," Richard Rohr Daily Devotional, Nov. 5, 2020 <https://cac.org/mysticism-precedes-politics-2020-11-05/>