

Bringing Our Own Oil

Matthew 25:1-13 *“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”*

Today and for the next two Sundays I will be working with the last of Jesus’ teachings as collected in Matthew 25. These teachings have to do with “final things,” God’s ultimate purposes and what ultimately matters. Such teachings are stranger to us than in Matthew’s day. The early Christian community expected Jesus’ immediate triumphal return to establish once and for all God’s reign upon the earth. This could happen at any moment, they thought, and they needed to be ready for it. The theological word for all this is “eschatological,” meaning to speak of the “last things.”

The early church’s expectations were disappointed. Through the centuries there have been those who still insist on such a literal “second coming” of Christ. Each movement has been fervent in its conviction that “now is the day and the hour,” and all have been equally wrong. It is the same today with similar expectations. Does this mean that these teachings and stories of intense expectation and preparation have no value for us? Not at all. I think that perhaps these are the “parables” and “dark sayings of old” that the psalmist is speaking of. It has to do with the deepest mystery of God and God’s will for the life of the world, and how it will all unfold.

Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 25 are all under the theme of God’s reign and how and when that reign will be accomplished. Jesus says two things about it: First, it is certain that it will happen. God’s purposes will be accomplished. Nothing can stand in the way of the new life God wants to give to the world. Second, however, no one can know the times and seasons, WHEN it will completely unfold. Ours is to live as those prepared, who expect God’s reign to break through. We are called to live our lives as those prepared for God’s reign over all of life, to wake up from sleep, to be spiritually alert at all times. These are central themes in Christian spirituality throughout the ages. In fact, the call to spiritual alertness and preparation is part of most spiritual traditions—Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Native American, and so on. The sense of it is this: God’s reign, God’s new life for the world, is happening all the time, here and now. But we are so spiritually numb, so asleep that we do not see it. Our spiritual work is to wake up, to be alert and watchful.

So Jesus tells this parable of ten bridesmaids, or young girls, who take their oil lamps and go out to wait for the bridegroom to arrive. This is part of the wedding custom in Palestinian village life. The lamps are not so much to see in the darkness as to enhance the celebration. If the lamps were to burn out, it would be more of a social embarrassment than anything else.

The ten girls fall asleep while waiting, but wake up when the word comes that the bridegroom is near. Five of them panic. They don’t have enough oil to keep their lamps burning. They appeal to the five who brought extra oil, but are rebuffed. “If we share our oil with you, there won’t be enough for us all. Go to town and buy yourselves some oil.” While they go off to town, the bridegroom arrives, the wedding banquet starts up, the other five go right in, and the doors close. When the girls come back from town, they are unable to get into the wedding festivities. Because they were not prepared, they miss the very thing they were waiting for so anxiously and excitedly.

Why the lack of compassion? Why couldn’t the five prepared girls share just a little of their oil? Why couldn’t the doorkeeper let the girls slip on in, late as they were? What would that hurt? Well, the parable doesn’t allow for such things. The upshot seems to be that each is responsible for her or his own readiness. We are to bring our own oil. And what might that oil be? I think for us here in the Church of the Covenant, it could mean one’s own spiritual life, taking responsibility for our own lives of faith. Gordon Cosby, Bev’s brother, came back from chaplaincy in World War II troubled by what he experienced in combat. He attended to soldiers who came to their deaths without awareness of their relationship with God. Gordon saw this as a crisis for the church, that there needed to be a new emphasis on personal responsibility with regard to our faith, that we

each need to take seriously our relationship with God. This was how the emphasis on committing to spiritual practices or disciplines became part of the Church of the Saviour and also the Church of the Covenant.

Living our lives in relationship to God is not something someone else can do for us. We have to bring our own oil. The spiritual life is not something we can borrow from someone else. In the end, it is not something we can get from someone else's experience or knowledge or personal charisma. It has to be our own. That is because the spiritual life is about waking up to our own life in relationship to God, to the world, to others, to ourselves. It is about knowing our own inner life and experiences. It is about embracing our own strengths and weaknesses, our woundedness and wholeness. The spiritual life ultimately is about knowing who we are as those created and loved by God, and what God has gifted and called us to be and do with our lives.

I find myself thinking of this business of spiritual awareness and preparedness in relationship to difficult things that we all face. Over the years, I have been with many people facing some crisis or another. The death of a loved one. The onset of severe illness. The struggle with emotional or mental illness. The breaking up of relationships. And for some, simply entering into the latter years of life, facing the increasing limitations of aging. Basically there are two kinds of responses. There are those who have nothing to fall back on, nothing to call upon spiritually at such times. Their participation in the church has been superficial at best, relying on a kind of second-hand religious exposure to get them through life. There has been little or no attention to prayer, to study, to reflection at a deeper level on their own lives. So when the crisis comes, they are like the five girls who brought no extra oil with them. Then there are those who have worked at some level with their own spiritual lives all along. Maybe their spiritual practice has been spotty or kind of a formality. And yet when difficulties come, they at least know where to go to seek refuge, help, strength, a kind of solidity. For some, the challenges of life bring bitterness, anger, fear. For others they become the gateway to a deeper, richer, wiser life. It has to do with preparation, with bringing our own oil.

However, we need to recognize that in this parable, the event that is about to happen is not something dreaded. It is not about preparing for the worst, but for the best, for a party, a celebration, a marriage festival! Jesus begins the parable by saying that the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God, or God's coming reign over life, is like this. It is like the young girls expectantly awaiting the wedding celebration. Jesus compares God's reign over life as a great big party. It's something you don't want to miss out on. Spiritual alertness, keeping awake, being prepared...this is all so that we really notice what is going on, so that we see what is happening. There is a sacred dimension to life, all around us, even in the difficult experiences. The spiritual life, bringing our own oil, is so that we don't miss it.

It is like what Celtic Christianity calls the "thin places." The whole creation is infused with God's presence. But we hardly ever notice because we are so lost in our heads, so crammed full of what we call knowledge, so preoccupied with the past or the future, immersed in worry or guilt or shame or fear or just caught up in achieving things. Once in a while, however, when we become empty and inwardly still enough, we encounter a "thin place," a person, experience, a taste or smell or sound that awakens us fully in the present so that we touch the sacred dimension of life. That is why we commit ourselves to spiritual practices, or disciplines. Not so that we can claim to be religious or spiritual or holy, but so that we gradually—and for most of us it is gradual—wake up to our own life and life around us. We begin to see the world as it truly is and not through the deadening grid of our jumbled thoughts or preconceptions or prejudices or the fog of our preoccupations.

Jesus' parable is about living expectantly so that we are ready to perceive what God is doing, the reign of God breaking into the world right around us. Monday night we had our annual meeting of the Festival Center Board. We were welcoming two new members to the Board—Michelle Jackson, activities director of the College Hill Apartments and a resident of the College Hill neighborhood; and John Hughes, president of the Alpha Psi service fraternity that meets each month in the Festival Center, and a social services professional working with youth. We were going around the table introducing ourselves to John and Michelle. When it was Rachel Wilson's turn, she beautifully spoke of her involvement with the Festival Center from the beginning. The weekly lunches we held in that old building the summer of 2003 for anyone interested in exploring possibilities for its

use. The calling together of a mission group with the vision of establishing a place for community, for peace, for overcoming divisions of race and economic status, for serving the expressed needs of the neighborhood. Rachel shared how the mission group had experienced God's guidance and providing along the way. When we needed money, somehow the money came. When we needed leadership, somehow the right person appeared. When we offered our first program, a Saturday morning program for young children, we sat by ourselves for three or four Saturday mornings until the first child—Jaden—walked through the door. Everything was about preparation for what we expected God would do, whatever that might be and whatever it might look like. There are no guarantees. It is all about patience, commitment, waiting, prayer, watchfulness so that we can be ready to perceive and receive God's bringing of new life. It is about the divine and human partnership that gives birth to the kingdom of God on earth.

Bringing our oil means working with the inward and outward dimensions of the life of faith. It means staying with it, making a commitment, and incorporating into our daily lives practices of silence, inner listening, study, prayer, and the awakening of our awareness of our lives in God. And it means showing up time after time, not looking for quick answers or results or whatever, but keeping the vision clear and central, and being faithful to it for the long haul. That is how God is able to get our attention, and how we are able to perceive what God is doing and give ourselves to it. The party is already happening. We just need to bring our own oil, to wake up and join it.