

Our weddings still have bridesmaids, but other than that, perhaps we feel a little removed from this parable of Jesus' in Matthew.

When we invite people to our weddings today, we tell people to show up at a particular time. 2:00 pm, let's say. But in Jesus' day, and even today in the middle east to some degree, time has a different priority. The invitation to this wedding would have said, "please join us on Tuesday. Or maybe Wednesday." Because the party wasn't going to start until the bridegroom arrived. And if his camel were stuck in a traffic jam in Tel Aviv or he were delayed on business or if he were standing in line to vote, then the party would be delayed until he got there. So the bridesmaids had arrived at the church early, helped their friend into her wedding finery, put on their own fancy dresses, and then taken their lamps to line the road, so that when the groom arrived, he'd be able to see where he was going.

Because that is another difference from our lives. We don't spend much time in actual darkness. We are used to streetlights, the glow from the lights of our cities and towns. Even when the lights are off, we are surrounded by the glow of reflected light. But darkness was real and treacherous for the people hearing this tale the first time. So the bridesmaids line the route with their lamps.

And here is another major difference between our lives and theirs. When we need light, we flip a switch. Or grab our flashlight. Or that new hand crank/solar powered emergency radio/flashlight that NPR was giving away in their pledge drive. If the power goes out, we can always grab some matches and light a candle.

But these bridesmaids had to use lamps. Into one of these clay lamps, they would put a wick and then fill it with oil. The closest thing we have to it today are the candles on our communion table. Did you know they were filled with oil? And when the flame grows dim, it means that they need more oil.

Now I know that when I flip a switch, it requires electricity, which often is powered by oil, but we are pretty removed from the actual oil. Unless we're saying "drill baby, drill" or otherwise talking about our oil supply or alternative energy, we don't have to get our hands dirty, or oily, as it were.

But these bridesmaids, these friends of the bride and groom who were so excited to help the celebration, needed to think about oil. And the wise ones did. They recognized that the waiting time could be long. The foolish bridesmaids, on the other hand, were perhaps so excited about the party that was to come that they didn't worry about the details in the meantime. For all we know, they had vats of oil sitting around at home, but a fat lot of good it was going to do them now. So this text is not about hoarding or stockpiling. You can sock away all of the oil in the world, but if you don't bring it with you when you head to the wedding, it won't do you any good. You cannot be the light of the world, or the light for the bridegroom, if you leave your oil squirreled away in your closet. Oil is only of value when you are willing to use it.

So, five of the bridesmaids were ready to use it. Five were not. Please notice that this is not an "us vs. them" text. Even though Matthew often does divide people into camps, in this case all 10 of the bridesmaids were invited to the party and were close enough friends of the couple that they were invited to this task. We shouldn't be looking for the foolish bridesmaids outside those doors. We are them. Wise and foolish all in this room. We are together in this.

And, this particular bridegroom was late. Very late. All of the maids had fallen asleep. But when they heard the shout that he was on the way, they woke up and made preparations,

trimming the wick and refilling their lamps. But the foolish, who had left their extra at home, tried to borrow some from the wise. At first glance, it is the wise who look like hoarders here. I can hear them saying, "a lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part".

"Oh come on!", we want to say, "just give them a little".

But, in truth, there are some reserves you have to shore up for yourself.

Let's say the bridesmaids had all been flying to this wedding, when the plane had trouble and the oxygen masks dropped down. What do the flight attendants always say during those safety talks at the beginning of a flight?

"Please secure your own oxygen mask before assisting others."

If this parable had taken place on a plane, perhaps the foolish bridesmaids would have not just been asking the wise to help them but would have said, "We didn't bring oxygen masks. Give us your oxygen masks".

Because for the wise to share their oil at that point in the evening would have meant that nobody would have had enough oil.

There are some reserves you have to prepare for yourself. Others can't do it for you. No matter how much they might want to.

I think of friends who wish they could just give their faith to their friends or their children. When you see someone who is hurting, or feels alone, all you want to do is help them. Fix them. Let them know what you know. That God is with them. That they are not alone.

And we do what we can. We teach our children and bring them to worship and Sunday school. We pray for our friends and visit those who are alone. But, ultimately, we can't give them our faith. We just can't. We can invite them to join us in the journey. We can be present with them in their journey. But we can't just pour the faith out of our own lamps and put it in theirs. It just doesn't work that way.

I think about some of the shut-ins of this church, and other churches, with whom I have visited. It is not uncommon to hear them say something like, "I wish I could keep my pledge to the church as high as it used to be. I care so much about this church and want to build for the future, but my medical expenses have doubled and I have just enough to get by. I will still give what I can, but I can't give as much as I would like."

These people, and others, who have built this church, would like nothing more than to fill each one of our lamps, to fund the budget of this church. But it doesn't work like that. We each need to do our part to keep our own lamps lit.

I don't know what your part is. I can't just tell you, "give us x amount of money and we'll have what we need." All I can say is that you have to consider the future for yourself, look at the reserves you have, and figure out what you need to bring with you so we'll all have enough.

This oil crisis is about putting things in the right order. While one lesson in this text is that there are some preparations you have to make for yourself, another lesson is this:

You can help other people **after** you've filled your own lamp. As I am learning how to get done all of the things (or as many of the things) that being your pastor requires, I'm learning that.

If I'm too busy and don't take the time for my prayer life, I end up wiped out and unable to really be there for you. But if I start my day at the office in prayer, before I tackle the rest of the to-do list, I find that I somehow have the time to get the rest of it done too. So, for me,

to keep oil in my lamp involves dedicated time for prayer and scripture reading as well as making sure I get home to be with my family.

What does it take for you to refill your lamp? What are the reserves you need to shore up so that you will be able to light a path for someone else?

Because we **are** called to light the path. The bridegroom shows up and tells people to “Keep awake! For you know neither the day nor the hour.”

On one level, this story is surely about Jesus’ return. His followers were and had been, expecting his return any day. And you can imagine that if you think Jesus is coming back tomorrow then maybe it isn’t so important that you go do the laundry this afternoon.

But the bridegroom says, “keep awake.”

Matthew is addressing a real concern in his community. What do we do while we wait for Jesus’ return. We are told to keep awake.

That doesn’t mean to just sit there and look down the road so we’ll see the bridegroom when he approaches. This isn’t a passive waiting to which we are being called. We are to keep our lamps trimmed and burning. It is an active waiting. It involves preparing the way. It means we volunteer to teach Sunday school so we can share our light with others. It means we help weed the flower beds at the church or rake the leaves so that our facility will be inviting to others. It means we visit and send cards to people who are alone. It means we sign up to greet people, to usher, to serve on committees. Our understanding of stewardship involves more than money. Yes, we believe that what we do with our money speaks to our priorities. But we also believe the same of our time.

At our house, we spend, conservatively, 8 to 10 hours a week making sure our kids get to soccer practice and soccer games. Do we spend that much on their faith development? When I was in youth ministry, I heard from families all the time, “Jimmy would love to come to youth group, but he just doesn’t have time.”

On one level, I know that is true. Kids today are often over scheduled and the demands on their time can be great. But, on another level, I wonder—how did we get here? How did we end up at a place where church is something that we fit in at the end, after we’ve done everything else first? How did church slip below soccer, video games and college football on our national priority list?

I haven’t made reference to the Joshua passage we heard this morning, but the two are not unrelated. Joshua, who led the Israelites after Moses’ death, called the Israelites together and makes a statement we still hear today. “Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” While some read this as a one time decision, I think it might be an each day decision too. Each day, this day, we choose whom we will serve. And some days are likely going to be better than others. But we do it again, each day.

Many of you, I know, are actively involved here, doing the work of the kingdom. I know that because I wonder if some of you are here more than I am.

But **all of us** are called to be actively preparing for God’s kingdom.

We are called to be wise bridesmaids. And not out of fear that we won’t get into the party.

We don’t choose God out of fear. We choose God in response to the gifts and grace we’ve already received. We are to keep our lamps trimmed and burning so that when the bridegroom shows up, we’ll be ready to join the party. This text is about awaiting the kingdom with a watchful joy. When I hear the bridegroom say, “Truly I tell you, I do NOT

know you,” I confess I get a little annoyed. The tone I hear in my head for that line is angry Jesus with his hand up, emphasis on the “NOT”. But as I’ve been thinking about this text, I started hearing another tone in Jesus’ voice. “Truly I tell you, I do not KNOW you.” I hear sad Jesus acknowledging a truth. Perhaps he wants us to keep our lamps trimmed and burning so that we’ll be free and ready to spend some time with him at the celebration. The more time we spend in preparation, the better we’ll know each other when the party starts.

I don’t know the day nor the hour either. But I do know this. It is in the preparations—in the spending time serving alongside you— that the light shines bright enough that I can see a little further down the road.

As we move along in our stewardship campaign, even though it is in the midst of relatively dark economic times, I invite you this week to consider the oil that you have to bring along with you as you prepare for Christ. It is in darkness that we need light the most. Let us bring our oil in watchful joy and pray with anticipation and excitement about what God is dreaming for us here at Southminster. Amen