

Proper 27A, 2014
Peace Lutheran Church
November 9, 2014
Matthew 25:1-13

MANAGING OUR OIL

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

There's a song I grew up singing as a child that is quite an earworm – perhaps you too know it well. *This little light of mine – I'm going to let it shine. [x3] Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

The song references a text that comes earlier in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 5:14-16:

“You are the light of the world...No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, **let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.**”

I imagine many of you grew up, like me, hearing that you had light within you, light that was meant to shine for all the world to see. Some take this at face value and neglect the second half of the lesson – this light is not about self-glorification, and is not about how amazing or special you are. I don't mean that harshly or unkindly – only to say that it is far more than any of those things. **This light that shines from within you is the gift of grace that reveals the heart of God to all of creation.** You are the light of the world. Now, that is quite something to hear.

Today's parable of the bridesmaids is about light as well, but almost incidentally. There is a little bit of context we probably need to know considering this parable and its time, but nothing will be strange to our current context of weddings today. Bridal processions in Jesus' time often took place at night – the groom came to escort the bride from her home to the wedding banquet. It was an incredible honor to be a bridesmaid, bearing the lamps that lit the way for this symbolic and important journey.

It was not uncommon at all, however, that the bridegroom's arrival would not be at a time that could be precisely preordained or anticipated. Journeys were arduous, dangerous, and unpredictable. There was every reason to believe the groom would be delayed.

I have very often heard this parable as being about preparedness and planning, the wise and the foolish bridesmaids. I suppose when one is telling a story with a message, one ought to be cut and dry for the sake of clarity. But in all honesty, from the stance of a therapist, nothing is ever cut and dry – taken too literally, this story is nonsensical. These so-called “wise and foolish” bridesmaids would've probably been 12, maybe 13 or 14 years old. Given the importance of their roles, I have a hard time imagining there would not have been adult supervision.

No, I want to imagine a different emphasis to this parable with you today.

Remember what I said about your light? The light that we read is to reveal the glory and reign of God, the coming of a new creation? This parable is so relevant to us today because it actually opens a conversation for us about the oil needed to keep those lamps burning. How do we, two thousand years after Jesus' life and death, keep oil for our lamps in preparation for the great wedding banquet that is the kingdom of God on earth?

Take a moment to close your eyes and root deep within yourself. Allow yourself to be reconnected to the way you experience yourself when you know the light of God is shining in your heart and in your life – how has that light been manifest in you? How does it feel – in your body, in your heart, in your mind – to be filled with that light? In my life, it is these times at which I most feel I see and know myself – just for fleeting moments. And I have the strange but serene knowledge that I am rooted in God's goodness and truth and that others are able to connect through who I am in these times. At my very best, this is who I am, and who you are.

Staying rooted down to your core self, allow the brightness of the light of grace to fade away. Connect to the sensation of yourself in darkness – what you have said or done, how you may have harmed another in word or deed, or even yourself. Feel the claustrophobic feeling of the small, cold world of that experience.

Every one of us in this room could call up times when our lamp was shining brightly, lighting the path to the wedding banquet we all so greatly desire, joyfully inviting all people to the table. Each of us can remember times in which our lamps were dead, the path was dark, and when we knocked on the door of our own hearts, we did not even recognize our reflection. Who is this person who has so greatly disappointed and betrayed us? We are prone to want to lock the door and send them away, deny our own failings and brokenness.

Each of us in this room probably knows too what it is like to be asked for oil from someone whose light has not been maintained – the unfair and unrealistic expectation that we could spread ourselves paper-thin and still shine. It would've been clear to those who heard this parable that if the five wise bridesmaids had shared their oil, all the lamps would've burned out too early and the procession would've been left in darkness.

But I suspect I am not the only one here who grew up believing it was morally wrong to deny someone of something they needed, and frowned disapprovingly when the bridesmaids refused to share the oil and sent the others to the dealers. But I am asked to see more honestly the times – too many times – I have painfully and excessively diminished myself in an effort to fuel others. It is not ultimately a service to them or to myself.

I said before, I think this parable raises the question for us of what it means to manage the oil needed for our lamps. When I faced that question myself, in preparation for this morning, it occurred to me that I don't know that I have any answers as to what that oil represents in our lives. I have vague notions about what might be part of my own oil – athletic conditioning (okay, exercise), contemplative prayer, quality time really connecting with people I love and with whom I feel safe... crocheting, the scent of homemade rosemary soap. Sometimes, it's allowing myself to break down and cry when the weight of the world seems too great. Sometimes, it's the belly-laugh that results from our very fluffy kitten tripping over his big feet for the twelfth time.

Thankfully, it's not my job to tell you what your oil is – it's your calling to identify what feels your capacity to shine brightly, to let God work through you in this world, and to light the path to that wedding banquet. It's good work, and important work – and especially here in Seattle, seems to be neglected work that falls between the cracks of our over-busy, work-centered lives.

I want only to close this morning with the clarity and power of the Gospel truth, and forgive me, because it seemingly conflicts with the conclusion of this parable from Matthew. We all fail to shine. Ultimately, despite the honor it is to carry God's light in our hearts, each of us winds up in the dark time and time again. And while we often reject our own selves and reject one another, the threat that God would turn us away because of our sin does *not* loom over us. The end of this parable leads many to believe that if our lamps fail, we will be turned out to the darkness and the cold. And while that may be our lived experience among other humans, that is not our experience of the love of Christ.

So, whether your lamp is shining brightly this morning, whether it is flickering dimly, or whether it is extinguished completely, you are invited to the Christ's table just as you are. Receive God's grace, be nourished by Christ's love – hopefully, it is enough oil to light a spark. Amen.