

MATTHEW 25: 1-13
GIVE ME OIL IN MY LAMP
NOVEMBER 12, 2017

I don't know about you but the first thing I want to do is to argue with this parable. I want to say – what IS this, “Truly I tell you I don't know you” and shutting the door in their faces. What IS that? THAT's not the Gospel I know.

If that's your reaction as well, that's good. That's really good. In the same spirit as the prophets, and the whole tradition of Judaism and of Jesus himself, that's what the scriptures are meant for. Wrestling with them and struggling with them and asking them questions. Wrestling with a piece of text and not letting it go until you receive a blessing. That's as biblical as it gets. That's what we're going to do today, but maybe this morning it's better to say
We're going to squeeze this parable until we get the last drop of oil out of it that we can. We're going to invite this story tomine our hearts, in a way. Go boldly into places that are deep down, and that matter.

I have a feeling that if I launch into a broader discussion of the text and some of its history right now, I'm going to lose you because you'll be still stuck on that exclusion...the shut door and the refusal to share the oil. I would be. And you should be. It's disturbing. So let's tackle that first. Here are some of my own thoughts mixed with those of a colleague. They are certainly not the last word on anything but I offer them to you for now.

At its plainest meaning, this parable does its work by separating and excluding. The women are separated from each other (by the amount of oil in their lamps) and they do not offer aid to each other. Those who arrive late have the door shut in their faces, this, though it is the middle of the night and they are alone on the street. Beyond that, this story of separation and exclusion aims its energy at women.

With many of you, and many Biblical scholars, I am suspicious of such stories, and have come to distrust them. There is danger in narrative schemes that only work if women are made to be foolish. There is danger in any theological structure that imagines that separation and exclusion are the essence of faithfulness. It is time we pointed these dangers out.

For now, and to get you to at least come with me into some of the other aspects of the text, I'll simply say this: at the end of this gospel, after the resurrection, at the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus no longer does his work by separating and excluding. When, resurrected, he appears to his gathered disciples, almost all of whom have betrayed him and run away, (Matthew 28, only three chapters from this scene), he does not slam the door in their faces and say “I don't know you” Instead, he sends the whole mixed group out to baptize and teach, and he explicitly promises to be with ALL of them, wise and foolish, worshipers and doubters, throughout the ages.

I wonder if he ever apologized to the little girls that he called fools?

If you're going to take a piece of scripture and honour it by taking it seriously enough to question it, if you're going to do that, there are a few things you'll want to do.

First, you need to understand as well as you can when it was written, by whom, and why. This is a lifetime's work, but for our purposes today, it will help to know this:

- whenever you're reading someone's account of the words of Jesus, you're dealing with at least two layers: First the words of Jesus himself, remembered and passed down. Most often by word of mouth, sometimes written down. So you ask yourself what Jesus himself meant by telling this story when he did (and of course we'll never really know that; we weren't there and neither were most of the people who wrote it down eventually. But you do your best, with the help of people who study these things for a living....to understand what he said in its original context. What did JESUS mean by this?

And then you ask about the next layer.... ..of all the stories Matthew had at his disposal, everything that had been passed down to him, (he's writing this a generation after they were spoken)why did he choose to tell us this one, why did he put it at this place in his gospel, and how did HE understand it?

- I know you've heard me say this before but it's important. When Jesus was crucified and then raised from the dead, he told his followers that he was coming back. Many of them, most of them we think, believed that meant....in bodily form....and right away. Certainly within their lifetimes. It never crossed their minds to write things down because they thought he was coming back....on Tuesday.

- as time passed, and he did not return (in the way they expected) ...some of them who knew him in the flesh, who had worked with him and heard him in person, they began to die off. And new people, people who had never known him, began to come into the community. And children were born who had never known him. And the others said "we'd better write this down"

- and so they did. There were many gospels written. Of those, we have four. Of those four, Mark was written first. Shortly after the year 70. I'll tell you why that's important in a minute. So Mark writes. 10-15 years later, Matthew and Luke, separately, in different cities, write their gospels. They write with a copy of Mark in front of them and they copy his and add to it, traditions that they had received, remembered, and found important for their own communities. John wrote independently around 10 years after that.

- The year 70. Why that's important is because....you know how when I say "9/11" everyone knows exactly what that means, remembers where they were when it happened, and how the world changed afterwards? All I have to say is two numbers. (Or for people in the UCC, you say 1988 and that's all you have to say?)

70 is like that in this world. In the year 70 the Romans marched into Jerusalem and sacked it. Burned it, razed it to the ground. Murdered thousands. People fled to save their lives – it was a blood bath. Nobody alive then would ever forget it and it changed everything. And soto write the stories of Jesus, to talk about him visiting the elders in the temple, encountering and accepting people of all races and countries including Romans....those stories were not neutral, you know? It was powerful enough when Jesus was doing that but after....

After the year 70? To speak about Jesus, prince of peace – accepter and welcomer of Gentiles, Romans, Syrians... – was like a stick of dynamite.

And Matthew is writing in the aftermath of that. And no matter what the subject, at one level you're talking about that. Does that make sense?

So you read a parable like this and say....what did J himself mean when he told it, and does it mean

something else as well in the mind and through the pen of Matthew? Just a question.

- a couple of historical things that might help with this

- first of all, a wedding is a classic symbol of deeper spiritual things. The kingdom of God is often referred to as a wedding feast. And the relationship of Israel with God, and the relationship of an individual person with the Holy One is often spoken about as intimate, covenanted, passionate love, like a romantic relationship, like a wedding. So when there's a story about a wedding you KNOW you're starting to talk about deep down things.

- also, Biblically speaking, Oil is a symbol of being set aside for a purpose (we still often use oil at baptism and confirmation); it's a symbol of joy and unity and healing and the goodness of creation. To run out of oilI think that's saying something deeper than just the oil for the lamps. And if we wanted to push this more deeply, we know that oil in the far north is a source of heat and light and nourishment....and oil is necessary for our own bodies' health....there's rich stuff in this image alone. We need to have oil for our lamps. In every way.

Marriage custom of that day was as follows: The Groom would prepare a place for the bride. It might be his own house or a place at his parents' house. Then he would go to her parents' house to get her. There might be a small party there. Then the Bride and Groom would return together for the marriage feast or banquet (which usually lasted for seven days).

The ten young women would be somewhere along the route between the bride's house and the groom's house. They are waiting for the bride and groom to return and they hope to join the procession and enter with them into the party. If they are with the crowd, they will be able to slip right in. If they aren't with the procession, then the door keepers will turn them away because they don't know them. They don't have an invitation.

- You might find yourself asking in this storywhere is the bride? What does it mean that the bridegroom arrives, but not the bride? If this is meant to be symbolic, an allegory, how does that work? I have no answer, I'm just spinning out questions now.

-it might help to know that the word Mt uses for "lamp" means, not those small clay aladdin type ones that I picture, but larger, nighttime torches held high. Does that change how you picture this or question it?

You get the idea. Once you get digging into a piece of scripture....it's fascinating, and deep. And all of what we can discover like thataffects how we understand the thing.

I'll stop for now, except for one thing:

This seems key to me. Remember how I said that the gospels were written in the first place because they realized that Jesus was not coming back as soon or in the way they thought? And so they started to write, and tell, and retell the stories about Jesus so that new Christians would know.

And in the writings themselves you can see the early church trying to understand why it was taking so long. And remember I talked about the year 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem? Many, many of them believed....here it is, this is the beginning of the end for sure. He's coming back any day now and

they walked around looking up and waiting

These stories at least at one level are told to say to people

We don't know when Jesus is coming back We don't know and it's not helpful do keep guessing or expecting it any day. What's helpful is to be ready – how? By living lives worthy of the Gospel. Living how Jesus did. That's how to stay awake and stay ready.

And....(I can't resist this because...it completes the thought) if you read on to the end of chapter 25.... There is a text that says....

You're watching and waiting for Jesus to return? HE'S ALREADY HERE!!! And you say where???

And Matthew says “whenever you did it to the least of these my little ones, you did it to me” - when you feed the hungry clothe the naked, visit those in prison.....THAT'S JESUS. HE'S BEEN HERE ALL THE TIME.

So....all of that is background. Now I'm going to read it once more and offer a couple of thoughts.

READ IT

So it seems clear that this is about times of waiting, and having enough....resources.....to keep going when it's dark and when what you're waiting for seems far away. It's about having what it takes to sustain yourself when a time of crisis comes. Does that seem right to you?

Whether it's Jesus, who is speaking this parable between Palm Sunday and....the coming Friday....He knows what's coming and it must have been hard for him to wait.

Whether it's him, or whether it's Matthew and his community coming to grips with what it means to wait in the uncertainty in those years following the resurrection and then the end of the world as they knew it....

Or whether it's us

Trying to wait when waiting is hard

Trying to cope when unexpected things happen

This seems to be saying

We have to be ready. We have to have oil in our lamps because the cold and dark can last a long time

And the unexpected

Can catch us unawares and unprepared.

You never know, you really don't, what's coming next. And when something broadsides you, in some ways it's too late then to start building up the resilience, the tools, the strength you need to face them.

You need the oil ahead of time so you're ready. You know?

What kinds of things are oil for our lamps? What do we need to be able to withstand long times of darkness and doubt

And what kind of things do we need to sustain us when the unexpected catches us?

You know how I often say at the beginning of the service “it doesn't matter what you believe”? More than one of you has challenged me on that, and I thank you for it. What I mean when I say that is this: to be here, among us, to come in to the church, to worship with us, there is no requirement. There's no test, no list of doctrines to which you must give intellectual assent. Nothing like that. It doesn't matter what you believe or if you believe, for you to come and be with us.

BUT does it matter what you believe as you live your life? Absolutely it matters. It matters very much. It's not for me or anyone else to tell you what you have to believe

But to work at your own set of beliefs, to be deliberate and disciplined about that, and to work at your spiritual life, your beliefs, your practices that keep you grounded and authentic and real...to work at that the same way you work out at the gym or whatever you do to keep your body healthy...to work at your beliefs and your spirituality like that...

That matters very much.

Does that make sense?

I have a friend who lives....elsewhere. She was part of my junior choir ages ago, and we've kept in touch. Her father died not long ago. Recently I asked her about church and she said "to be honest Bev my faith has been shaken by my father's death"

When I explored that with her, and when I asked "what part of your faith has been shaken" it turns out that her faith, was faith that nothing bad would ever happen to her or to her family. That's what she meant by her faith. Her dad was sick and she prayed he would get well. When others thought he was going to die, she said "just have faith" And when he died, she felt betrayed, and forgotten by God, and is questioning whether there really is a God at all, and...you know how that goes. Her faith was faith that nothing bad would ever happen.

Well, if that's your faith, if you haven't gone deeper than that, of course when something bad happens, you're going to be shaken. It seemed to me that her lamp was empty. She and her partner have planned and worked at everything in their lives. They are marathon runners, they spend hours at the gym. They have their financial lives planned very carefully....but they haven't given any thought or time or energy to their faith, to figuring out what they believe and why....so that when the bridegroom is delayed, to use the language of the parable, you're ready. You have oil to get you through.

So I'm just asking myself this week, and asking you too: are you topping up your oil? What do you need, as a person right now, to sustain you when it's cold and dark and you're waiting without knowing? What do you need?

How do you keep your oil container full? What kinds of things strengthen you, feed you, give you resilience for the long haul, or for unexpected things that side swipe you and send you reeling?

An active, questioning, exciting faith life is one of them, let me suggest. It's an oily thing to do....keeps you supple, flexible, as oil does. Lubricates the imagination and expands your range of movement, emotionally speaking. Allows you to be able to sit in the dark if you have to,

So that's the first thing – what kind of oil do you need and how do you keep it topped up? Could you withstand a sudden and unexpected event? Is there something you need to be doing to strengthen yourself the best you can?

And...can we be oil for one another? Can we be part of the plan for each other to support and strengthen, to be strong and to lean on as that song says? To be oil for one another? A community that can hold you when you need to be held?

The second thing is about ...I guess the theology of the unpredictable. If we know anything at all about God from the scriptures it's that God shows up in the most unexpected ways and at the most unexpected times and through the most unexpected people.

Part of the oil of our lives needs to be the kind of oil that lubricates our senses, and our imagination, so

that we'll actually recognize the Holy One when She's right in front of us – at the weirdest times and in the most astonishing people and ways.

Finally, here's a thought from a scholar called Robert Capon.

“When all is said and done, and we've scared each other silly worrying about being locked out of the wedding party, we need to take a deep breath, and let it out with a big belly laugh. Because what we're waiting for is a party! And that party isn't down the street or somewhere in the future, making up its mind when to come to us, trying to trip us up
It's already started – it's in our basement, banging on the steam pipes
And laughing its way up our cellar stairs

The unknown day and hour is bursting into your kitchen. And it's not dreadful. It's part of the Divine lark of Grace. And God is not like that sour faced guest who runs a judgemental finger over the window sills to see if you dusted, or checks to see if you've worn the right clothing,
God is that guest who shows up with a salami under one arm and a bottle of wine in the other and says let's eat I brought enough for everyone.

We do have to keep awake, we do have to keep watch
But only because it would be such a shame to miss all the fun

I wish you a very oily week this week
And God's richest, most unctuous blessings as you think about these things.