

“Is There an Oil Shortage”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 9, 2008

Stewardship Commitment Sunday

Psalm 78:1-7

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 25:1-13

Did you realize that a parable of Jesus, a part of our holy scripture, actually seems to discourage sharing? While waiting for the groom to come and the party to begin, five of the bridesmaids run short on oil; their lights are starting to fail; and so they ask the other five if they can spare some of their extra. Nope. There's not enough oil to go around. Maybe there's time to buy more; maybe there is a store that will be open at midnight; and maybe they can get back to the waiting spot in time. Nope. They're too late. They missed their chance; the door was closed to them; and the bridegroom claims to not even know them.

“Be prepared.” This seems to be the lesson of this parable about the wise and foolish bridesmaids. Is this a story that any Boy Scout or insurance agent could have told us? Be prepared; hang on to your oil; and remember that if you've got it, then you're only a fool if you give it away. Is that really the message here? If it is, then this is not good news, it is just plain depressing. If the key to the kingdom of heaven is “looking out for number one” then the party we look forward to may not be worth the wait.

Throughout this gospel, Matthew often hints that the church is a mixed bag. Jesus says: "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Matt. 7:21) Matthew envisions the church as being like a field where the weeds and wheat are mixed together. Through the stories and parables of Jesus, Matthew discourages those zealous weeders who would try to clean things up prematurely, deciding for themselves which should be kept as the good harvest and what is to be thrown out as trash. We also hear of the two men who built their houses – maybe by looking at them they were identical houses. One was built on rock and the other on sand. One day – we don't know exactly when – the storms came and only the house on the solid foundation stood strong.

To uncover the deeper meaning of this parable, we must consider what it was that some of the bridesmaids had and others lacked. All of them were dressed for the party; they were – as we'd say down in Kentucky – all “gussied up.” All of them carried lamps to help them navigate through the night. In other words, all of them were prepared to go to the wedding party – the awaited only the arrival of the groom to properly usher them into the reception. By all appearances, they all appeared the same. And as the hour grew late, all of them became tired and fell asleep. In this sense, even though they all appeared ready for the groom to arrive, none of them, neither the wise nor the foolish, none could fully heed the call to “keep awake.”

The only difference between the wise and the foolish was having brought an extra reserve of oil. In biblical tradition, oil was something used not just to light lamps and to

flavor food, but to anoint: to mark someone as protected, chosen, or blessed. The oil is a gift, given to each and representative of the abundant promises of God. But, once marked with oil, it was up to that individual to use their oil wisely; to put blessing into action through acts of faithfulness; by their good works. Therefore, Jesus tells the crowds in the Sermon on the Mount, “let your light shine before others, that they might see your good works” (Matt. 5:16)

Ten bridesmaids; all of them dressed for the party; all of them waiting for the groom to arrive; but only some of them came prepared for the long wait. Some are asked to share what they have, but cannot. Who knows, maybe the wise or the foolish have lots of oil back home, but some were not prepared for the moment; did not anticipate such a long delay. Maybe this is not a story about how much oil you have. Maybe this is a story about the oil you carry with you; the oil that you use to let your light shine.

I realize that many of you have, over the years, likely heard many Stewardship Dedication sermons. I know that most of you have already prayerfully and practically considered for yourself what level of financial giving you will pledge today for the coming year. I understand that today’s service isn’t like attending an Italian wedding where you wait to see whether the pasta is *al dente* and the good wine has been served before you make a decision about what gift you will give.

I also realize that these are difficult financial times in our local community and in the global economy. I know that while fuel prices may have fallen recently, many of you face your own particular economic challenges and uncertainties. I know. And I know that in the church we have to pay close attention to things like membership and attendance figures, and to the rising costs of programs and staff; maintenance and supplies. I recognize that this church is not alone in that a lot of things – and a lot of good works – are taken care of by a fairly small number of people.

In many ways, those who have been in the church for a while; those who let their lights shine through the many ways they give; those who have been anointed with the oil and practice good works – have been sent to be spent. After the lamps burn for a while, the oil reserves seem to run low. There is – for Christians in the church – depletion, but there is also replenishment. Although drained, we can be refilled. We may live our life in the world, but we draw our life from God. The grace of God is a renewable resource, and we are recyclable. If your flame is burning low, listen again to the words of Jesus who says, “Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” and refreshment and renewal and replenishment.

When I look at this gathering of Christians, I see not an oil shortage, but instead a renewal and replenishment within the body. I see an incredible gathering of youth who are serving in other churches, raising money for mission projects, spending time with the elderly, bringing joy to others through music and theatre. I see congregation members taking food to those who are sick, giving rides to those who need it. I see our children being inspired to study their Bibles, sing praise to God, and ring with the handbell choir.

I see people who quietly, and often without notice, volunteer with Habitat for Humanity and at their children's schools, and with our local parks, and at our polling places.

Is there an oil shortage? I don't think so. There might be shortfalls in the funds we would like to use for building projects or there could be lower numbers in this program or that than in previous years. There may be people who are cautious about engaging in a church ministry or program because of what happened in the past, or because of uncertain present conditions. There may be people who feel stretched in many directions or ready for a break from some responsibility or another. But is there an oil shortage? Are we really supposed to be like the bridesmaids in the parable who are asked to share what they have but instead keep it for themselves?

One of the hardest things about this parable, the thing we all come to know but don't always want to admit, is that we all have times when the oil seems to be in short supply. We may not feel good about how much we are able to give – of our time, our talents or our treasure. We may not feel right about the reasons why we choose to give or not give – our motivations, our desire to be appreciated, our fears about where giving of ourselves might leave us empty. We may be blindsided by a crisis we did not anticipate; or come to realize that our words or efforts or caring isn't having the effect we would want. A time will come, in every life, when you have to draw on the oil you have, right there, on your body, in your flask. And it isn't going to come from your pension savings, and it isn't going to come from your good intentions and your long range plans; it's going to come from what fuels you spiritually right now.¹

That is what it means to be prepared; to stay awake even when it is dark outside. The church is not just a gathering place of like-minded individuals; people who want to do similar good things; who by all appearances appear the same. The Christian church is the body of Christ where the members of that body can grow and heal spiritually. It is the place where we come to encounter God and to be reminded that we are blessed, anointed with oil, so that we might be a blessing; people who carry in our flasks the incredibly good news of God's grace; and of Christ's loving sacrifice for us.

Let's think again about what it might mean in this story to be one of the foolish. Their one task was to welcome the bridegroom with joy and when the critical moment arrived, they had abandoned their post. They acted as if it was their job to have oil in their lamps and to go find it themselves if they lacked it. But this was not their primary job, their primary task. The oil was only a means to an end, and it is not clear that it was a necessary means. Their task, their job was to mediate and communicate joy, between bride and bridegroom; between Christ and the waiting world. Their job was to be the heralds of unbelievably good news. But by confusing means with ends, they failed in their task.²

The good news in the parable is that the bridesmaids never have to go looking for the bridegroom. He has come already; and comes to us over and over again. The joy that

¹ Anna Carter Florence, "Filling Stations"

² Samuel Massey, "The Door to Joy Ajar"

God gives to us is already here, at our side, in our midst, as we walk in and out of that door. It's not about possessions, power, wealth, and position for us or for the church. It is not about what we have in reserves at home, or in the bank, or in our pension plan. No, it is about joy.

So, stay awake; be ready. This is not such an easy story to tell, but it is one that we must remember, because the wait is long and sometimes difficult. But the wait can also be our greatest joy. "Are we prepared?" Are we learning God's word, doing God's work and praising God in every time of the day and every season of life?

May the oil in our lamps keep burning. This is our prayer. This is our blessing. And this is our opportunity to bless others. AMEN.

Now to the One, who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Jesus Christ to all generations, forever and ever. AMEN.

(Ephesians 3:20-21)