

Today's parable opens with a familiar phrase, "The kingdom of heaven will be like this." The kingdom is like the whole scene portrayed by this parable where there are some chosen bridesmaids, each and every one of them selected for this role. It is expected that the bridesmaids would await the arrival of the bridegroom and greet him with a procession of light in the darkness. Presumably the bridesmaids are waiting either at the brides' home for the groom to come and fetch her or at the home of the groom's family where the wedding would take place. All the maids have either lamps or perhaps large torches. All are waiting with their lamps lit in eager expectation of the groom's appearance.

The bridegroom is delayed. In reality, a groom's delay was not altogether uncommon. For instance, there could be last minute negotiations between the groom and the bride's relatives over the gifts exchanged. It doesn't really matter. There are always delays in the best of plans. Because of the delay of the groom and the late hour, all the bridesmaids have fallen asleep. Their sleepiness is not the problem, since both wise and foolish alike have become drowsy. The wise brought extra oil for their lamps. All of the chosen women knew that the groom was coming and waited with their lamps burning, but only half considered that the wait in the darkness might be longer than anticipated.

When all the maids were awakened at the announcement of the groom's arrival, they all set about trimming and preparing their lamps for the procession. To the horror of the foolish, though, they discovered that they would not have enough oil to keep their lamps burning. The wise maidens refused to lend their extra oil. If they gave away their oil, they would not have enough. Then what would become of the procession? *(Summary of parable adapted from Carla Weeks writing)*

Have you ever thought, like me, that the wise maids' suggestion to go to the dealers to buy more oil seems ridiculous? The text says that it is midnight. Where will the foolish maids buy oil in the middle of the night?

The Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence says that of course, the parable doesn't say whether the bridesmaids had any oil at home. It doesn't tell us if the wise ones were hoarding it or the foolish ones hadn't had time to get to the store yet. It doesn't tell us what they had in their savings accounts or how generous they were with their worldly goods. For all we know, the wise bridesmaids were down to their very last flask of oil, and the foolish bridesmaids were sitting on barrels of the stuff; the parable doesn't tell us. Its only concern is what they brought with them when they left the house. It doesn't say a word about motives or extenuating circumstances or reasons why five women might conceivably have left their oil flasks at home. And that's significant, I think. Maybe this is not a story about how much oil you have. Maybe this is a story about the oil you carry with you. And the parable is very clear: all ten bridesmaids had lamps, but five of them were foolish and five of them were wise. The wise ones brought flasks of oil with their lamps when it was time to wait for the bridegroom. The foolish ones showed up with lamps and nothing to keep them going. And when your lamp goes out, you may have gallons of oil sitting at home; but it's not going to do you any good there.

So what does that look like, the kind of oil you carry with you? What does that look like, if it's not a commodity that we buy and sell?

Maybe it depends on the kind of oil we're talking about. Once, in a class I led with teenagers, I set out an oil lamp complete with oil and wick, and we talked about being called to be light for others-

"the light of the world." I lit the wick and in darkness and silence, we watched the lamp burn. But (and here was the rigged part), because there was only a tiny bit of oil in that lamp, it only burned for a few moments. I asked the teens: what happens when the oil runs out? Well, then the lamp light goes out, and you have nothing to give. And a person with no oil, a Christian with no oil, can't be the light of the world for anybody, no matter how much they want to. So then I asked: what fills you up spiritually when you run dry? What replenishes your oil? Where do you find God, and how can you make sure that you get enough of that oil for your lamp, so that God can fill you up again? Because you will run dry. And when you do, you can't be a light for anybody. Remember the safety speech we hear on airplanes? "In the event of an emergency, oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling; please be sure to secure your own oxygen mask first before assisting others."

I am the Rector of this church, I am also a spouse and a mother and a friend. I'm proud to be an Episcopalian, a Christian, and I know what it means to run out of oil, and I'm guessing you do, too. Did you ever have a day when your kid or partner walks into the kitchen at 5:30 and says, "What's for dinner?" and you say, "Meatloaf," and they say, "What, again?"-and suddenly you have morphed into Godzilla, right there in the kitchen; and when you have finished ranting they look at you calmly and say, "Let me guess. You're out of oil." It's fairly simple. When the arrow on the gas tank points to empty, you are going to run out of gas. If a two-year-old doesn't get a nap, she is going to crash. When you haven't had a conversation with your spouse in three weeks that hasn't revolved around carpooling logistics or bank accounts, your marriage is getting dry. If you have worked sixty-hour weeks for longer than you care to know, your relationships are going to suffer. If you rant and rave at the guy driving in front of you, you're out of oil. It's not really something any of us can avoid. There are some kinds of fuel that just are not negotiable; and if you eat junk food for ten years, your body is going to let you know about it.

There are also some kinds of oil you can't borrow from anyone else. Teenagers learn this, at a certain point; you can borrow someone's homework and get by on the assignment, but you can't borrow the hours they put in studying for the test. There are some kinds of preparation we can only do for ourselves. There are some reserves that no one else can build up for us. You can't borrow someone else's peace of mind or their passion for God. You can't say to your friend, "You have such a happy marriage, don't you? Could you give me some of that?" It doesn't work. You have to find it yourself. You have to figure out what fills you up, spiritually, and then make sure you have some to carry with you, every single minute of the day, because that's how often you'll need it.

And here's the thing: you will run out. Time will run out. The hour gets late, everyone gets sleepy. We all doze, we all put it off, saying, "One of these days, I'm going to quit working so hard and I'll put in that quality time with my kids." "One of these days, I'm going to take up painting again; I've always wanted to do it." "One of these days, I'm going to stop writing checks and really get involved down at the church's food pantry or the meal program." We all doze. We all put it off. And then the shout goes up: "He's coming!" It's time. And one of these days is today, and it's over, and you never did bring your flask of oil.

I think that's one of the hardest things about this parable. The time will come 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. It's going to come from where you see and meet God, today. And where is that? Well, Jesus tells us. I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was in prison, and you visited me. I was sick, and you comforted

me. That's where we find him. That's where we get filled up. That's where we gather the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. All of those things that we can't check out of the library, and we can't borrow from our neighbor next door. All of those things that are just there for us to gather, but we seem never ready to do it.

I think there are some church folk who use this parable as a way to scare us all straight are missing the point. You don't fill your lamp because you're afraid you're going to get locked out of the Kingdom of Heaven. You don't stockpile oil because then you can turn everyone else away and that's so much fun. No, you just stop at the filling station, and fill your flask and take it with you, because you can't wait to meet the bridegroom. This church is one of your filling stations. I'm sure you have others too. Why do you fill your flask? You fill your flask because you fill-er-up out of joy. That's the only price of oil, *the only price of oil*, when you think about it: the desire to meet Jesus when he comes. Which he will. Soon. Very soon. *Amen.*