

The Foolish and The Wise

A sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented Sunday, November 12th, 2017
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 25:1-13

This parable hits a little too close to home for me. The truth is, I do like to be prepared. I think it's a good idea to show up with a sermon if you've been asked to be the worship leader of a congregation. I'm in favour of savings accounts and life insurance and taking care of our physical and mental health so that we do not become unnecessary burdens on the state or anybody else

I believe in being prepared, and I bet you do, too. We are part of a culture that practically worships planning, forethought and preparation for the unknown that lies ahead. I think it is why we get so angry when something goes horribly wrong: when a Finance Minister doesn't use a blind trust while serving in Parliament, or tax shelters that are so widely used and accepted by wealthy insiders, while the rest of us pay every cent of our taxes or face an audit. It looks like we're a bunch of fools who don't know what we're doing. Surely if there had been a better plan (I have said myself, perhaps you have too) we could have been prepared for this. If we had had some wise leadership, this disaster would never have happened.

Oh, this parable hits very close to home. I don't much like those smarmy, smart-assed bridesmaids who showed up with their own flasks, but the truth is that I recognize them and if they were running for office, I'd probably vote for them.

So is that all we have, in the end – just a story that any Boy Scout and insurance agent could have told us? Is that the message, here? Be prepared, hang onto your oil, and remember only a fool gives it away. Well, that's depressing. That sounds like Jesus has been having lunch with corrupt politicians, like somebody got to him. Is the Kingdom of Heaven just one backroom conglomerate to justify somebody's agenda to get re-elected? Or is the Kingdom of Heaven really no different than the empires of earth, where we store up oil for our own survival? Donald Trump seems to love this (America first – me first) mentality. And why not? I guess most people think like that! It got him elected, didn't it?

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. For all we know, the foolish had maxed out their credit accounts, and the wise bridesmaids were sitting on barrels of the stuff; the parable doesn't tell us. Its only concern is what was brought with them.

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 oil at all. 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? Maybe it depends on the kind of oil we're talking about. At my seminary a professor would give a lecture to the students about the spiritual life of the preacher. And one time during this lecture, he brought an oil lamp, the kind with a wick and real oil (just a little bit) in the bottom, as a visual aid. He lit the lamp and in a few minutes it went out. He asked the students: what happens when the oil runs out? Well, then the lamp light goes out, and you have nothing to give. And a minister 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 he asked: what fills you up

spiritually when you run dry? 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 a minister in a church at the moment, I am also a father, a husband and a friend. I am a Christian, and I know what it means to run out of oil, and I'm guessing you do, too.

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 your marriage is getting dry. 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 twenty 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. 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, minute by minute throughout 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 and I'll put in that quality time with my wife....one of these days, I'm going to write that book; I've always wanted to do it. We all put it off and doze...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 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 God, today. And where is that?

Well, Jesus tells us, "...I was hungry and you fed me. I was a stranger, and you welcomed 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 and faithfulness. All of those things that we can't check out of the library, and we can't borrow from our neighbour next door...all of those things that are just there for us to gather.

I think churches who use this parable as a scare tactic 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. No, you just stop at the filling station and fill your flask and have it with you, because you can't wait to meet the bridegroom. Oh!, did I mention the name of the bridegroom – his name is Jesus. Amen.