
When the Oil Runs Out

Matthew 25:1-13

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 9, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Nora Tubbs Tisdale

In the part of the country where I now live—New England—it appears that Fall is the new June as far as weddings go. My husband and I attended three weddings in the space of 4 weeks this fall—one per weekend.

The first was the wedding of two people who met in their 60s, long after both had given up hopes of finding another life partner. The wedding took place in the bride's back yard, where battery-operated chandeliers hung from the trees, where guests were invited to lounge on sofas made of hay bales and draped with colorful cloths, and where tables of all sorts and sizes were set up for the wedding feast the bride herself had prepared. To watch this couple lovingly gaze into one another's eyes as they danced to the folk musician who played the guitar for their backyard wedding reception brought tears to many of our eyes. The whole wedding was a testimony to the fact that sometimes people do unexpectedly find love in later life.

But I also noticed that when the bride and groom collapsed into their chairs to eat the wedding dinner, they looked exhausted. All the hard work of preparing for this wedding had taken its toll on them, and they were glad to be able to kick their shoes off at last, and just relax.

The last wedding we attended, the wedding of a couple in their 20s, took place in our church sanctuary. The groom was the fourth generation in his family to be married in our church. The bride was a public school music teacher, who had met her beloved while they were teaching at the same school. They and their families had worked for months to make sure this day came off in a picture-perfect way.

On the day of the wedding we, the family and friends of the bride and groom, gathered in our small stone church near the sea as a talented pair of musicians played organ and flute duets. All was ready for the wedding to begin. Only, it didn't begin. We waited—5, 10, 15 minutes. People began murmuring, wondering what had happened. Eventually the minister for the occasion came out and announced that the bride and her attendants were stuck, on this very rainy day, in weather-related traffic and would be delayed getting there. They finally did arrive, over 30 minutes after the wedding was originally scheduled to start.

But as the bride walked down the aisle with her father, we all had a sense of the stress this delay had caused. It was not until the service itself actually began and the prayers were said and the hymns sung and the scriptures read, that we all finally breathed a collective sigh of relief that everything finally back on track for this couple and their wedding day.

The Stress of Weddings

Weddings can be stressful. As anyone who has ever been a part of planning one knows, the parties involved are often stretched thin by the time the day itself arrives. There is so much to coordinate that often everyone breathes a huge sigh of relief if things go off as planned.

I have a feeling, from today's parable in Matthew's gospel, that things were much the same in Jesus' day. Here Jesus tells the story of a wedding proceeding according to the customs of his time. The bride and her attendants have all gathered at the bride's home to prepare for the wedding day. They are dressed and ready, and have lit their lamps, awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom, who is to come and meet them, so that they can all process together back to his home for the wedding feast.

Only at this wedding, it is the bridegroom who is delayed. Not just a little delayed. *A lot* delayed. Not just minutes delayed, *hours* delayed. So delayed that all ten of the bride's attendants actually fall asleep waiting

for him. So delayed that when the bridegroom finally does arrive—at midnight, no less—half of them have run out of oil and have no light with which to process with him to the feast. So late that instead of joining the procession to the groom’s house, the five without oil have to run out to the local all-night convenience store to buy some. And by the time they finally get to the wedding feast, the door is closed, and they are denied entry.

This is a tough parable. And frankly it is one of a series of tough parables that occur in this section of Matthew’s Gospel—all of them emphasizing the fact that even though the second coming of Christ has been delayed, we, the disciples of Christ must stay alert and be prepared for it. This is the second of four such stories. And I think it is important to emphasize that the focus in these stories is not so much meant to be on who God is, but who we, the church are called to be.

We, like those early Christians to whom Matthew’s gospel was addressed—Christians who were undergoing persecution and hardships of every kind—are called to be alert, awake, for we do not know the “day nor hour” when Christ will return. And if that message was appropriate for a church that had been waiting a couple of decades for Christ’s return, how much more appropriate it is for those of us who have been waiting a couple of millennia for that return. Talk about a delayed wedding! *Most of us have not only fallen asleep; we have ceased expecting Christ to return at all.*

But frankly, I suspect that is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of our low expectations regarding Christ and His appearance in our lives. The real question is: how many of us these days expect Christ to break into our personal lives, or into the life of this troubled world, *at all* these days? How many of us, like those 5 “foolish” bridesmaids, have let our own oil of expectation run out, and have fallen prey instead to the cynicism and despair that are far more common in our own age?

Low Expectations

Last spring I taught a course on worship at Yale Divinity School. On the day we were talking about marriage and wedding services, one of my students spoke up and said, “Let me ask you something. Why should we in the church be encouraging people to get married at all? Most of the people that I know in my age group—the 30 somethings—have given up on marriage altogether. They have seen too many marriages end in divorce or brokenness. They have also watched the church consistently deny marriage to gay and lesbian couples, some of whom have been living in committed relationships for years. So tell me, what is “Christian” about Christian marriage? Do we really expect God to play any role in marriage at all?”

Or, let’s move to the workplace, another area where expectations about God’s inbreaking can also run pretty low. I think of a man I know who has spent his entire adulthood living out his own Christian vocation as a high school history teacher. He’s a wonderful teacher, who has always received stellar reviews from his students and his administration for his work. But in recent years with all the educational budget cutbacks that are going on in his state, instead of being promoted and applauded for his work, he is being burdened with more and more unrealistic expectations piled on him, so that his once upbeat spirit has become anxious and depressed. These days he is just hoping he can hang on to get the medical benefits he would be due in retirement. The oil of hope and expectation that God might actually break into his workday is burning understandably low.

Or think of the people you know and I know (perhaps you are one of them) who have prayed and prayed for something for years—the right life partner, the birth of a child, release from financial burdens, healing for a loved one—only to have those prayers go seemingly unanswered. It’s hard to keep the oil of faith burning in your lamp when it seems that Christ’s advent has not only been delayed, but derailed altogether.

Or let’s expand the picture beyond the personal to the larger sphere of nation and world. The night before the Nobel Peace Prizes were awarded this year, I was at dinner with some friends in New Haven. The “Today Show” that same morning had speculated on the top picks for the prize, including among them Pope Francis and Edward Snowden—an interesting duo to be sure! We were debating the pros and cons of each

when one of my friends, a devout Catholic, said that while he had great admiration for Pope Francis, he hadn't seen that his many pleas for peace in the Middle East had done much good.

“Frankly,” he said, “I think the Nobel Committee would be more honest this year if they didn't choose anyone. For it seems to me this has been a year when peace—or any hopes for it—have been in short supply.”

What do we do when we come to those points in our lives where we find it almost impossible to have hope or faith that Christ will break in at all? What do we do when we, who perhaps once had plenty of the oil of faith and hope in our lamps, find we are rapidly running out of it, and don't know how or where to get it replenished?

This parable doesn't directly answer those questions. I want to be honest about that. But I do think, if we read between the lines, that we might find some hints and clues.

What to do When the Oil Runs Out

First, as this parable clearly indicates, when we find ourselves running out of oil, the best plan is not to run off to the convenience store at midnight to try to buy what we lack, so that we miss the wedding feast altogether. Instead, we need to keep watching. We need to keep hoping. And, I would propose, we need to keep hanging out with those who *are* prepared and expectant, so that *if our own oil has run out, the light from their lamps can help illumine our way.*

Lauren Winner, professor of Christian Spirituality here at Duke, has written a very provocative essay on this passage in which she focuses on the unwillingness of the so-called “wise” bridesmaids to share their oil. Winner says that if she had written this parable it would have ended very differently. In her version the wise would have shared their oil with the foolish, so that none of them had enough. But the bridegroom would have welcomed them all anyway because in the kingdom of heaven there is no lack, and things are multiplied when you offer them to your neighbor.¹

Amen, sister. That is an ending I could have lived with too. Truer to who I know Jesus to be. Truer to who I know the church, at its best, to be.

The trouble is: that's not the parable we've got. So what do you do when the five who have plenty are not willing to share their oil? I say: you lean on them anyhow. You lean on them as you process out of the house, and let their lamps brighten your way. You lean on them until the time comes when your own oil is replenished, and you do have enough oil. *You lean on them, because in the church, that's also how we do things.* The strong carry the weak. The weak lean on the strong. And we all lean towards Jesus, in the hopes that he will open the door and welcome us all in.

William Sloane Coffin, the famous anti-war chaplain at Yale University who later became senior pastor of The Riverside Church in NYC, endured a great tragedy during his years at Riverside when his 19-year old son Alex was killed in a one-car accident while driving to Boston on a rainy night. Coffin says that on the Easter Sunday following his son's death he found it absolutely impossible to sing the hymns of resurrection. The oil of faith and hope in his own lamp was burning very low and he knew it. But he also says that what sustained him that day was simply being in Christian community with others whose lamps were burning brightly. “I couldn't sing the hymns myself,” Coffin said, “but it dawned on me: I didn't have to sing them. The whole community of faith was singing them for me, and all I needed to do was to be in their company.”

There is a great temptation when tragedy strikes or when hopes are dashed or when cynicism sets in about God's advent in our lives to separate ourselves from the very people whose lamps are still burning brightly. We hole up in our homes or our dorm rooms or our apartments, nursing our wounds, not wanting to

be “bad company” for others. Or—alternatively—we run around frantically searching in the wrong places for the oil that doesn’t ultimately satisfy.

But perhaps there is another path to follow. When your oil is running low and indeed has run completely out, stay close to those whose hope and faith are burning brightly. Get out of your house, your apartment, your dorm room, and go to places where the faithful gather. Go to places where the hymns of the faithful can lift you up, and the foretaste of that great heavenly banquet—the banquet we taste every time we gather at this communion table--can nourish you. *Hang out with people who have faith, and their faith can help make you whole.*

Some years ago, during a time in my own life when I was going through a very painful time vocationally and the oil in my own lamp was burning so dimly that I felt completely depleted, I wandered into a small New Jersey church that was known for its healing ministries. It was not my usual church, but it was the church where I felt strangely drawn during that season of my life. This was a church where a candle was lit each Sunday in solidarity with people who were battling addiction. This was a church where tissues were placed in each pew--not, as I first thought, for the sake of small children that might be worshipping with their parents--but for the sake of adults who were broken and wounded and needed a place where they could both weep and find healing grace.

Each week I would slip into the back pew of that church, hoping no one would notice me, using more than my share of those tissues, and soaking up the hope and faith I found there like a dry sponge. My life certainly did not turn around overnight. Indeed I ended up quitting my job with no job to go to, when I had one child in college and another who was on his way. It was a scary time. But what I found there was what I desperately needed to sustain me spiritually: the light and witness of other believers who knew what it was to go through hard, hard times, but who somehow had enough oil in their lamps to see them through.

But the second thing this parable reminds us of is that we ourselves need to replenish our own oil as best we can so that when Christ’s advent in our lives is delayed, we have enough to see us through.

I’ll be honest. Like Lauren Winner, I am very much bothered by the fact that the five bridesmaids who have oil won’t share it with those who have run out of oil. What’s wrong with them, I think? This certainly isn’t the model of Christian community I’d like to hold up and emulate.

The only answer I’ve seen that makes any sense to me is this one: maybe they can’t. In the same way that people of deep faith in my life ultimately cannot give me a faith transfusion when I need it, so it is that those who have built up the oil in their lamps through years of living faithfully cannot simply pass on their oil of faith and hope to others. They can inspire. They can encourage. They can let us lean on them. But when you come right down to it, the only one who can really replenish the oil in our lamps is God—as we open ourselves to God through practicing those disciplines of the Spirit designed to strengthen our own faith and hope.

I have a friend who is an exemplar to me of such oil replenishing these days. She is currently going through an incredibly difficult time in her own vocational life. She expected to receive tenure at her university last year, and was instead denied it. As a single woman with no place to go and a salary that will soon run out, she has every reason to be fearful and afraid. At the same time, her eighty year old mother, who is in a nursing home in another state, is battling Parkinsons’ disease, and is struggling to find reasons to stay alive. My friend had hoped to move her mother closer to her, but now that hope too has been dashed with her denial of tenure.

But both my friend and her mother are people of faith. And so this is what they do to keep the oil in their own lamps replenished. Each evening at 8:00 my friend calls her mother. Over the phone they (being good Methodists) read the devotional from the “Upper Room” devotional book and the scripture for the day. And then they spend time naming the specific things in that day they have to be grateful for. Often, my friend says, we have to search hard for something to add to this list. But inevitably, if we work at it, we will come up for some reason for gratitude. And somehow that makes us each feel a little bit better, a little more hopeful.

The only one who can ultimately replenish the oil in our lamps is God. But if we will open ourselves to God through those classic spiritual disciplines like prayer, scripture reading, or a daily naming of our thanksgivings before God, we will find that slowly and over time, the oil in our own lamps will indeed be replenished. And perhaps one day, we too will have lights that shine.

Conclusion

Friends, we Christians walk by faith, not by sight, and our *faith* tells us that we are living in a world where Christ might break in any minute. That is an incredibly counter-cultural thing to do—especially in a society where cynicism and despair more often win the day. But isn't this what faith is all about?

So yes, faith takes a gamble on marriage, even though the church sometimes gets it wrong and there are no guarantees that it will last forever.

Faith keeps on praying, even though there are no immediate answers to prayer.

Faith keeps on putting its neck on the line for peace and justice and freedom—like the 17-year-old winner of this year's Nobel Peace Prize, Malala Yousafzai has done—even though it is costly.

And faith keeps on finding something to be grateful for—even on those days when it is easier to name everything that has gone wrong.

So watch therefore, for you do not know the day or the time when the bridegroom will return . Watch, I tell you. For Christ will surely come again.

¹ <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/yeara/ordinary32gospel/>. Commentary on Mt. 25:1-3 by Lauren Winner.