

The gospel of Matthew is concerned for the inexperienced community of the church, trying to make its way with new believers in a world trying to tear the community apart. Many of those to whom Matthew writes had been excommunicated from the synagogue and abandoned by their families, without the comfort and safety of those supporting structures. Christian believers were struggling just to survive, so there is urgency to set their commitment to God and to one another right in a new community of faith.

So if community formation is so urgent, why does Jesus seem to make acceptance into it so difficult? "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like...ten bridesmaids [who] took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom." The ten seem equal in their response and enthusiasm at first: ten lamps burning; ten bridesmaids sleeping; ten bridesmaids waking up, hearing the groom arrive; and ten bridesmaids excited to get the party started. But, uh oh, only five have enough oil with them to keep their lamps lit. So while the five who are running on empty go out looking for a 24/7 convenience store, the others go into the party and shut the door. The callous groom refuses to open up when they return well supplied with lamps burning, crying, "Lord, Lord." But the door remained shut with an unexpectedly emphatic, "I don't know you!"

On its face this parable fits with our expectation for responsible citizenship in a competitive society: those who store up for themselves and refuse to share seem to come out on top. So then, keep it all for yourself, even when it means another woman will have to go out in the dangerous dark of midnight with no light. You can even gossip about her situation when she leaves and turn the music up so you can't hear her banging on the door to come in. But this parable *does not* fit with other things Jesus says in Matthew about not judging that splinter in your brother or sister's eye; about how if we knock, the door will be opened; or about forgiving not just seven but seventy-seven times. It doesn't fit with the story of Jesus blessing five loaves and two fish *shared* among thousands of people until *all* were satisfied, with abundant leftovers. It does not fit with Jesus blessing children or the search for the one lost lamb. It doesn't even fit with that other confounding parable where the kingdom is like a landowner who includes everyone in the work of the vineyard and pays them all equally no matter what time they arrive. As the Sesame Street song goes, "One of these things is not like the others." This one just doesn't feel like Jesus or sound like the gospel. This parable challenges most of the things I believe about God. It flies in the face of other pivotal stories in my faith understanding.

We are frustrated by Jesus' comparison of the kingdom to ten bridesmaids with flickering lamps—maybe it is because the kind of community to which they invite us is unlike any other, and its fullness requires more of its individual members than we care to admit. As much as we want to argue against this parable, we cannot. As much as the wise bridesmaids may want to share, they cannot do it..

At the moment; I am a mother, a spouse, a teacher 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. Your kids walk into the kitchen at 5:30 and says, "What's for dinner?" and you say, "Meatloaf," and your kids says, "What, again?"-and suddenly you have morphed into Godzilla, right there in the kitchen; and when you have finished ranting your kids looks at you calmly and says, "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, your marriage is getting dry. If you have worked eighty-hour weeks for longer than you care to know, your relationships are going to suffer. It's not really something any of us can avoid. There are some kinds of fuel that just are not negotiable.

There are some kinds of oil you can't borrow from anyone else, either. 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? 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, and then make sure you have some to carry with you, every single minute of the day. There are some kinds of preparation we can only do for ourselves, spiritual reserves that no one else can build up for us. It's something we each have to receive, cherish, and deepen in our own souls for ourselves.

This parable stresses the importance and the urgency of fueling ourselves up. As all ten bridesmaids awaken to realize, the time for acquiring oil and building reserves will run out suddenly and unexpectedly. Dark times come into every life, and it's in the darkness that we most need the sustenance of the kind of oil Jesus is talking about--assurance of the abundant promises of God, that peace that passes understanding, and that depth of hope that can sustain us through the darkness of disappointments and failures, devastating loss and grief--closed doors of all kinds. We will need hope urgently when our child is sick or parent helpless. We will need peace urgently when we realize there may not be enough money to pay the bills at the end of the month. We will need love urgently when we wonder whether a relationship will last or we fear how long it must be endured. We will need joy urgently when the pain of loss and grief seems never-ending.

Dark times come to every generation. This past week we heard about a deep darkness when we learned of the mass shooting in Sutherland Springs in God's house. Many have asked numerous questions. Again and again people wonder aloud, "How do we prepare for such a thing as this? How do we help our children through this difficult situation?" Again and again the people of the town had enough fuel to say, "Together we will mourn! Together, we will rise to be a stronger people."

Today's young adults are as worried about their future as are we older generations who hand it off to them. In a time when deeply spiritual experiences are hard to discern among Tweets and sound bites that deliver only fleeting returns; young adults have an appetite for more spiritual experiences and they seek spiritual fuel from experiences like enjoying time with pets, family, and friends, preparing and sharing food, and finding God in the beauty of nature.

Yet, our parable speaks of a source of sustaining hope and spiritual sustenance beyond what any of these can provide. Because while we each have to seek our own spiritual sustenance, the irony is that we usually discover what we need in community with others, seeking spiritual fuel together. This is why our work of our vision team is so important and your input or fuel to the process is essential. We are called to burn bright with God's love and grace for all God's children seeking spiritual fuel in the darkest hours. Jesus emphasizes the importance of faithful community throughout the Gospel of Matthew, and he tells us that life in Christ happens when two or more are gathered in his name and it is precisely there that our spiritual reserves are replenished.

Given everything Jesus tells us about community in the Gospel of Matthew, he cannot be satisfied with such a broken community as these ten bridesmaids. Jesus calls us to prepare for the time when the bridegroom comes in the dark. We cannot we ignore our discomfort with its ending. Thank God we hear this parable while the bridegroom delays and the door to the party is still open. We have the blessing of being ten bridesmaids together, each individually seeking deeply satisfying spiritual sustenance, and together receiving the nurture of a spirit-filling community of faith. Beside one another, we receive assurance from Word and sacrament that sin and death do not have the last word. Beside one another, prayer rises up without ceasing even if in silence or sighs too deep for words. Beside one another, we study God's Word and share experiences of that Word living in the world. Beside one another, we serve a world in need and witness God's constant work of resurrection and transformation. Beside one another, we sing the songs of faith and the songs imprint deeply with enduring reserves of grace and joy. Beside one another, God's spirit moves to meet the reality of our human suffering with the mystery of hope. Beside one another, in the community of faith the love of God continues to appear in surprising and unexpected ways.

Ten bridesmaids sit together holding their flickering lamps against the darkness, waiting expectantly for the party to start. In that community of faith we hear the good news that the bridegroom is surely coming to make all things new. All of those things we cannot borrow or lend, we cannot buy or sell, we cannot earn or withhold; our spiritual sustenance is right there all along and we come together to receive the gift, to share and to cherish it in sure and certain hope that for each one in this community of faith, there will be enough and we will be ready when Christ the bridegroom comes. Amen.