

Matthew 25: 1-13

YOU LET US CHOOSE, O GOD, BETWEEN YOU AND THE FALSE GODS OF THIS WORLD. IN THE MIDST OF THE NIGHT OF SIN AND DEATH, WAKE US FROM OUR SLUMBER AND CALL US FORTH TO GREET CHRIST, SO THAT WITH EYES AND HEARTS FIXED ON HIM, WE MAY FOLLOW TO ETERNAL LIGHT. AMEN.

FEW HUMAN EVENTS ARE MORE WEIGHTED EMOTIONALLY THAN WEDDINGS. PARENTS INVEST HEAVILY...TIME, ENERGY, CREATIVITY, RESOURCES, LOVE, AND HOPE—IN THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY FOR A BELOVED CHILD. BECAUSE THEY ARE SO LOADED WITH EMOTIONAL CONTENT, WEDDINGS ARE ACTUALLY FRAGILE EVENTS, WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL FOR MISHAP, AND EVEN DISASTER. FOR ONE THING, THE MAIN CHARACTERS---THE BRIDE, THE GROOM, AND THEIR PARENTS ARE STRETCHED THIN, AND DEEP FEELINGS COME EASILY TO THE SURFACE. THERE ARE TEARS AT WEDDINGS, AND PROFOUND HOPE, BUT ALSO SOMETIMES ANGER, RESENTMENT, AND FRUSTRATION. IN THE MIDST OF ALL THAT, THINGS CAN GO WRONG AND OFTEN DO. CLERGY GATHERINGS ARE RIPE WITH WEDDING TALES!

IT'S SIGNIFICANT THAT NEAR THE END OF HIS LIFE, AT THE TIME FOR SUMMING UP, JESUS CHOSE THIS MOST HUMAN, EMOTIONALLY LOADED EVENT AS THE CONTEXT FOR A PARABLE ABOUT THE KINGDOM. "THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN WILL BE LIKE THIS."

IT HELPS TO KNOW A BIT ABOUT THE WEDDING CUSTOMS OF THE DAY. WEDDINGS IN JESUS' DAY WERE EVERY BIT AS EMOTIONALLY HEAVY AS OURS TODAY, WITH THE SAME POTENTIAL FOR MISHAP. GUESTS ASSEMBLED AT THE HOME OF THE BRIDE AND WERE ENTERTAINED BY HER PARENTS WHILE WAITING FOR THE GROOM. WHEN THE BRIDEGROOM APPROACHED, THE GUESTS, INCLUDING THE BRIDESMAIDS, LIGHTED TORCHES AND WENT OUT TO GREET HIM. IN A FESTIVE PROCESSION, THE ENTIRE PARTY WALKED TO THE GROOM'S HOME WHERE HIS PARENTS WERE WAITING FOR THE CEREMONY AND THE EXTENDED BANQUET THAT WOULD FOLLOW AND CONTINUE FOR SEVERAL DAYS.

IN THIS PARABLE, FOR WHATEVER REASON, THE GROOM DOES NOT SHOW UP ON TIME; THE HOURS PASS, AND MANY OF THE WEDDING PARTY FALL ASLEEP. FINALLY, AT MIDNIGHT, THEY ARE AWAKENED WITH A SHOUT, "HE'S COMING." THE BRIDESMAIDS LEAP INTO ACTION, TRIM THEIR LAMPS, AND HEAD OUT TO MEET HIM. FIVE OF THE TEN HAVE USED UP THEIR OIL AND HAVE NO RESERVES. THEIR ATTEMPT TO BORROW SOME FROM THEIR WISER, MORE PRUDENT SISTERS IS REJECTED. FRANTICALLY, THEY SET OUT IN SEARCH OF OIL, NOT EASY AT MIDNIGHT, AND IN THE PROCESS MISS THE PROCESSION. WHEN THEY FINALLY ARRIVE AT THE GROOM'S HOME, THEY ARE LOCKED OUT AND DISMISSED. "KEEP AWAKE," JESUS CONCLUDES, "YOU DO NOT KNOW THE DAY NOR THE HOUR." STAYING ALERT, WAITING PURPOSEFULLY, BEING PREPARED, SEEMS TO BE THE MESSAGE HERE.

THIS IS A RATHER BIZARRE STORY FOR JESUS BECAUSE PEOPLE ALWAYS SHARE IN A JESUS STORY. WHY DON'T THE FIVE WISE BRIDESMAIDS SHARE THEIR OIL? SHARING IS WHAT WE'RE CALLED TO DO, EXCEPT, IT SEEMS, IN THIS PARTICULAR CASE. BUT SURELY JESUS IS NOT TELLING US TO HOARD AS MUCH AS WE CAN GET AND PRETEND THAT NO ONE ELSE IN THE WORLD MIGHT NEED IT TOO. THIS STORY OF SCARCITY AND HOARDING SIMPLY DOES NOT FIT WITH ANY OF THE OTHER PICTURES OF GOD'S REIGN IN SCRIPTURE. SO WHAT IS GOING ON?

COULD IT BE THIS PARABLE IS NOT ABOUT STOCKPILING FOR OURSELVES BUT RATHER ABOUT WHAT WE BRING WITH US ON OUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY? MIGHT IT BE THAT THIS PARABLE HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE OIL WE CARRY? THE OIL WE TAKE WITH US AS WE GO OUT INTO THE WORLD, WAITING FOR THE WEDDING PARTY TO BEGIN, KNOWING THERE MIGHT BE A LONG DELAY AHEAD? WHAT DOES THIS OIL, THE OIL THE WISE BRIDESMAIDS SEEM UNABLE TO GIVE AWAY OR SHARE, REPRESENT?

THERE'S A STORY OF A PROFESSOR AT COLUMBIA SEMINARY WHO BRINGS AN OIL LAMP TO HER INTRODUCTORY PREACHING AND WORSHIP CLASS. IT IS USED DURING THE "SPIRITUAL LIFE OF A PREACHER" LECTURE. THE LAMP IS PUT NEAR THE PODIUM AND LIT. AS THE TEACHER AND STUDENTS WATCH THE LIGHT BURN, THE TEACHER SPEAKS OF HOW PART OF ONE'S CALL AS BOTH CHRISTIAN AND PASTOR IS TO BE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

EVERYONE NODS. THAT IS NOT A BIG SURPRISE. BUT JUST AS SHE MAKES THAT STATEMENT, THE LAMP GOES OUT. THE PROFESSOR, OF COURSE, RIGGED IT BEFORE THE CLASS BEGAN BY PUTTING JUST A LITTLE BIT OF OIL IN THE BASE.

WHEN THE STUDENTS NOTICES THE LIGHT IS OUT AND CALL IT TO HER ATTENTION, THE PROFESSOR STOPS HER LECTURE AND ASKS THIS QUESTION: "WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE OIL RUNS OUT?" SOMEONE INEVITABLY ANSWERS THAT THE LIGHT GOES OUT. "EXACTLY," THE PROFESSOR RESPONDS. "YOUR LIGHT GOES OUT AND YOU HAVE NOTHING LEFT TO GIVE. THE TRUTH IS THAT A PASTOR WITH NO OIL, A CHRISTIAN WITH NO OIL, CANNOT BE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD FOR ANYBODY, NO MATTER HOW MUCH THEY WANT TO BE." THEN THE CLASS DISCUSSES HOW DAILY PRAYER, BIBLE STUDY, AND WORSHIP ARE CRUCIAL FOR A CHRISTIAN'S OIL SUPPLY.

HOW'S YOUR OIL SUPPLY TODAY? SOME OF US, MYSELF INCLUDED, MIGHT SOMETIMES FEEL A LITTLE LIKE A FOOLISH BRIDESMAID, RUNNING AROUND WITH BARELY ANY OIL TO SUSTAIN US FOR THE LONG HAUL, HOPING WE HAVE ENOUGH TO LAST, BUT DISCOVERING TOO LATE WE DON'T. IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW MANY TIMES WE ASK SOMEONE TO SHARE THEIR OIL WITH US, IT WON'T WORK. OUR LIGHTS STAY DIM, IF THEY STAY LIT AT ALL, FOR THE KIND OF OIL JESUS WAS TALKING ABOUT, THE KIND OF OIL WE NEED TO KEEP GOD'S LIGHT SHINING IN AND THROUGH US, IS A KIND OF OIL THAT CANNOT BE GIVEN TO US BY ANYONE ELSE. IT CANNOT BE BORROWED OR TAKEN.

LIKE THE SEMINARY STUDENTS TALKED ABOUT IN THAT PREACHING CLASS, THAT OIL COMES ONLY WITH THE REGULAR, ONGOING, DISCIPLINED WORK OF SPIRITUAL PREPARATION---THE WORK OF PRAYER, OF STUDY, OF GIVING, OF OFFERING HOSPITALITY, OF WORSHIP; THE WORK OF DAILY TENDING TO OUR AWARENESS OF GOD'S PRESENCE IN OUR LIVES; THE WORK OF DAILY STRENGTHENING OUR WALK WITH CHRIST...THE WORK WE CAN BE TEMPTED TO LET SLIP AWAY IN THE FACE OF THE CONSTANT URGENCY OF NOW. THERE IS ALWAYS SOMETHING ELSE, SOMEONE ELSE, DEMANDING OUR ATTENTION. AND THEN, ONCE THAT SUPPLY DWINDLES FROM OUR INATTENTION, OUR LAMPS END UP EMPTY, AND

OUR OWN LIGHT FLICKERS OUT, UNABLE TO LIGHT THE WAY FOR US MUCH LESS ANYONE ELSE.

UNDOUBTEDLY STAYING TOO BUSY PLAYS A HUGE ROLE IN OUR INABILITY TO PAY ATTENTION TO OUR SPIRITUAL LIVES, BUT THAT'S NOT THE ONLY REASON. WE CANNOT UNDERESTIMATE THE EFFECT OUR SOCIETY/CULTURE HAS ON US. MASS SHOOTINGS, WARS, DIVISION EVERYWHERE. WE NEED TO BE HONEST ABOUT THE EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL COST OF ALL THAT IS GOING ON IN OUR WORLD, FOR THIS CLIMATE WILL WEAR US DOWN AND WEIGH US DOWN. ADD ALL THAT UP, PERSONAL, SOCIETAL AND WE STOP PAYING ATTENTION TO THE LIGHT WE CARRY WITHIN US; WE STOP THE SPIRITUAL WORK OF REPLENISHING THE OIL NEEDED TO KEEP THAT LIGHT SUSTAINED. THROW IN A FEW MORE BUSY DAYS OR A FEW MORE NEWS REPORTS AND WE WILL FIND OURSELVES COMPLETELY DRIED OUT, EMPTY, WITH NOTHING LEFT TO GIVE, AT THE EXACT MOMENT WE NEED TO BE SHINING AND LIGHTING THE WAY BOTH FOR OURSELVES AND OTHERS.

TODAY'S PARABLE ASKS US SOME QUESTIONS. IT IS ASKING US TO FIGURE OUT WHAT FILLS US UP SPIRITUALLY AND KEEPS US FROM RUNNING DRY. WHAT FILLS YOU UP SPIRITUALLY? TODAY IS MY GRANDFATHER'S BIRTHDAY. HE WAS BORN IN 1913 AND MADE HIS CAREER AS A BEER DISTRIBUTOR, DELIVERING BEER TO THE VARIOUS BARS AROUND REDFIELD, SD. MY GRANDMOTHER WAS CATHOLIC AND BECAUSE MY GRANDFATHER WASN'T, HE NEVER ATTENDED MASS WITH HER OR ANY CHURCH FOR THAT MATTER. WELL INTO HIS 60'S, HE CONVERTED TO CATHOLISM AND NEVER MISSED MASS AND READ HIS BIBLE REGULARLY. 8 MONTHS BEFORE HIS DEATH FROM BRAIN CANCER, WHILE IN HOSPICE, HE FELT THE NEED TO WITNESS TO MY BROTHER AND GAVE HIM HIS BIBLE WITH THESE WORDS: "USE THIS BOOK WELL FOR SOME DAY IT WILL BE OF GREAT SOLACE TO YOU." SCRIPTURE KEPT MY GRANDPA'S OIL SUPPLY FULL RIGHT UP UNTIL THE VERY END. AND DESPITE THE FACT MY BROTHER DIDN'T WANT GRANDPA'S BIBLE, GRANDPA KEPT TRYING.

LET'S TALK FOR A MOMENT ABOUT THE SHUT DOOR AND THE "NO" OF THE BRIDEGROOM'S RESPONSE WHEN THE FOOLISH ONES ASK HIM TO OPEN IT. JESUS SAYS, "TRULY I DO NOT KNOW YOU." I HEAR JESUS ACKNOWLEDGING A TRUTH WE ALSO KNOW. WHEN WE HAVE

NOT TENDED TO OUR OIL SUPPLY, WHEN WE HAVE GOTTEN SO CAUGHT UP IN THE ANXIETY, THE FEAR, THE EXHAUSTION OF OUR WORLD THAT WE HAVE STOPPED SPENDING ANY TIME IN PRAYER, OR IN SERVICE, THEN WE DO NOT *KNOW* JESUS AS WELL AS WE DO WHEN WE ARE PREPARED AND READY.

WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT MESSAGE IN OUR STORY? I THINK IT'S THE PROMISE THAT THERE IS GOING TO BE A WEDDING SOMEDAY. REALLY, THERE IS GOING TO BE A WEDDING. WHEN IS THE LAST TIME YOU HEARD A SERMON ABOUT THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS? WHEN IS THE LAST TIME YOU THOUGHT TO YOURSELF, "OH MY GOODNESS, WHAT IF IT'S TODAY?" WHAT IF *TODAY* IS THE DAY WHEN GOD'S KINGDOM COMES IN ALL OF ITS FULLNESS, AND OUR BROKEN EARTH IS RESTORED AND MADE WHOLE, JUST AS SCRIPTURE PROMISES?

THE TRUTH IS MANY OF US HAVE GROWN ACCUSTOMED TO THE BRIDEGROOM'S ABSENCE. ACCUSTOMED AND INDIFFERENT. HIS ABSENCE AND DELAY ARE OUR NORMS, SO MUCH SO THAT DEEP IN OUR SECRET HEARTS, WE NO LONGER BELIEVE HE'S GOING TO RETURN. WE NO LONGER BELIEVE THERE'S GOING TO EVEN BE A WEDDING CELEBRATION. AFTER ALL, ISN'T THAT SCIFI STUFF, ALL THE BOOKS AND PARTING-OF-THE-CLOUDS TALK EMBARRASSING? WON'T PEOPLE THINK WE'RE DELUSIONAL IF WE TAKE IT SERIOUSLY? PERHAPS. BUT HERE'S THE PROBLEM...IF WE DON'T BELIEVE IT THEN WE BELIEVE JESUS IS A LIAR. JESUS SAID THAT HE WILL RETURN, JUST AS SURELY AS HE SAID HE WOULD BE CRUCIFIED, BURIED AND RESURRECTED ON THE THIRD DAY. ON WHAT GROUNDS SHALL WE CHOOSE TO DISBELIEVE A STATED PROMISE OF THE RISEN CHRIST?

OUR STORY ENDS WITH A WEDDING!!! IT ENDS IN CELEBRATION AND JOY! WE DARE NOT ABANDON THIS GLORIOUS ENDING SIMPLY BECAUSE WE'RE GROWN TIRED OF WAITING.

SO WE WAIT.....AND WHILE WE WAIT LET US BE MINDFUL TO TEND OUR OIL SUPPLIES. LET US DO WHAT WE CAN TO MAKE SURE WE ARE ABLE TO LIGHT THE WAY FOR AS LONG AS IT TAKES UNTIL THE PARTY BEGINS! A SONG I LEARNED AT CHURCH CAMP IS A FAVORITE.