

“Foolish”

Matthew 25:1-13

Harvest Sunday

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer of Invocation: Holy God, enter these quiet moments with the breath of your Spirit. Silence in us any voice but your own. Open our ears to Your word read and proclaimed so we may we hear with joy what you have for us this day. Amen.

I ran out of gas again. This time I was driving home in my new-to-me-car. Let's say we were in the "getting to know each other" phase of our relationship. I was getting used to its modest bells and whistles. That night, I guess I was waiting for the yellow light to come on that told me "low fuel." I just kept going, driving, wondering just how big this gas tank was.

It was late. It was a long day at the end of a long week. I was two right turns and ten miles of interstate highway from home. I passed through an intersection and began to coast. Uh-oh! Then the car choked and jerked a few times before the steering wheel locked up and I coasted onto the berm. I was tired. I was hungry. I was mad at myself for my poor planning and I'll admit it, more than a little scared.

I could see it-the bright yellow Sunoco gasoline sign on the right before the interstate. It seemed like a long way off in the dark. I got out quickly, locked the doors behind me and walked into the night.

I resonate with the women in today's text that ran out of fuel. All my anxieties came rushing forward for me that night.

Being ill prepared. Foolish. All I wanted to do was refuel, get in my car and go home.

I find today's parable more than a little perplexing. We often hear in the Gospel of Matthew about what the kingdom of heaven will be like. Here, a life with God (kingdom) is like ten bridesmaids [who] took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom." The ten seem equivalent in their response and enthusiasm at first: ten lamps burning, ten bridesmaids sleeping, ten bridesmaids waking up, hearing the groom arrive; and ten being excited to get the party started.

But, only five have enough oil with them in flasks 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. And when the five who left in search of oil return, they are met with a shut door and a groom who refuses to open the door-proclaiming, "I do not know you!"

This is the kingdom of heaven? On one hand, this parable fits with an understanding of being responsible citizen: be prepared. Plan ahead. Care about yourself first. 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 into the dangerous dark of

midnight with no light. And when she returns to knock on the door--you turn up the music so you can't hear her knocking!¹

This parable does not fit with other things Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus shares a lot about not judging that splinter in your brother or sister's eye. Jesus reminds us that if we knock, the door will be opened. Today's parable 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 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.

So what are we to do with this text then? On Tuesday, I wanted to rewrite the whole parable. I wanted those wise bridesmaids to get with it and to help a sister out. I wanted Sheryl Sandberg² to help those wise bridesmaids *Lean In* a little and share some of the oil with the other bridesmaids. And, I wanted that groom to open the door and host the party where everyone is in.

As much as I wanted to rewrite the parable, I couldn't do it.

¹ Rev. Beth Sanders, www.day1.org

² Sheryl Sandberg is the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook and founder of LeanIn.org Foundation.

To be honest, this parable hits close to home. I like to be prepared. I want to keep things organized and schedules to run on time. I dislike it very much when I arrive somewhere and forgot the tickets at home.

I do think it's a good idea to have a savings account and prepare for retirement. I believe in being prepared, and I try to limit surprises and unexpected additions. And, I bet you do too.

We live in a culture that loves advanced planning and forethought and preparation for the unknown that lies ahead. Certainly, we get angry when things do not go the way we plan. When something creeps up on our calendars that we hadn't prepared for, or when the budget is overspent, it makes us look like we don't know what we are doing---foolish. Surely if I had a better plan, I could have prepared. I so much want to be one of those wise bridesmaids that comes prepared with my own flask of oil.

But here's the thing: "eventually we all will run out of oil. We will all run out of time. The hour is 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 family. One of these days, I'll pick up the hobby I

used to love. We all doze. We all put it off.”³ And we run out of oil. We are left in the dark and we are on empty.

Life interferes with our ability to refuel. If I wasn't running late that morning---I would have stopped to get gasoline in my car during daylight. We all lose the oil in our lamps. We often run into a place of exhaustion; a place where we are more impatient; a place where it's hard to feel rejuvenated. We find ourselves in a place that doesn't feed our souls because we are working too hard, sleeping too little, not paying attention to the relationships in our lives.

A friend shared with me this week that at one point in her life with her three children at home and working full-time, she “had a hard time telling the difference between relaxation and narcolepsy.” She would sit down on the couch or at the symphony and just fall asleep. That resonates. The oil that fuels the lamp is out.

When life interferes with our ability to refuel and we have a sense of urgency to fill our lamps, we also know that no one can fill up our lamps for us. As much as I wanted those bridesmaids to share their oil, there are some kinds of oil you can't borrow from anyone else. At certain points in our lives we realize this.

³ Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence, “Filling Stations” www.day1.org

A teenager can borrow someone's homework and get by on an assignment, but they can't borrow the time and preparation for the exam. That proposal you're working on-won't write itself. You can't say to a friend, "You look so happy and that life is going so well for you, can I borrow some of what you have?" There are certain types of preparation you can only do yourself. There are some reserves that no one can build up for us. You can't borrow another person's peace of mind or their passion for God.⁴

You'll have to find that for ourselves. You'll have to figure out what refuels you, spiritually, and then you'll have to carry that with you, every minute of every day.

No matter what your vocational path. No matter how turbulent the times we live in. No matter the challenges you face in your life this parable asks the question. **What refuels you? What spiritually fuels you?**

In a community of faith, the spiritual fuel can come from worship or music, fellowship, study or prayer. For others is an intentional practice, like yoga, that reminds you of being grounded to something greater than yourself. For me this time of year it is a walk in the leaves to hear the crunch of them under my feet. Maybe it's in the face of a stranger.

⁴ Anna Carter Florence in "Filling Stations" offers such imagery which enhanced this sermon.

I ran out of gas again. In more ways than one, I was on empty. As I walked on the side of the road toward the gasoline station that night, I prayed that it was still open. Before I could knock on that door, the man inside must have seen me coming. I was the only one there. He locked the office and came out to help push my car the few yards up the slight incline to the closest pump. I am grateful for his kindness and his quick wit when he suggested I should get my low fuel light checked. We chuckled! I received his gracious hospitality.

There will come a time when we have to draw on the oil that we have, the fuel within us, in our own body, in our own flask. It won't come from our best intentions and our long-range planning.

It's going to come from what fuels you spiritually right now. It's going to come from where you see God, today. So, where is that?

Anna Carter Florence in "Filling Stations" offers such imagery which enhanced this sermon.

Jesus helps us with that. "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." (Matthew 25:35-36) That's where you'll find him. That's

where you'll find all you need to fill your lamps. Fill your lamps not because you are afraid that you won't get into the kingdom, but out of great joy that you get to meet the groom when he comes. And he will very soon.

Keep Awake. Keep your Lamps Trimmed and Burning!

Amen.

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