A.M.D.G. 22nd Sunday After Pentecost – A Text: Matthew 25: 1-13

November 9th, 2014 – Remembrance Sunday

‘Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.”Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.”But the wise replied, “No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.” And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open to us.” But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

**Does Your Oil Need Checking?**

If you ask any minister what some of their most memorable moments are in their ministry – many will point to funerals or weddings. Some of the most wonderful, laughable, frustrating and touching stories I have as a Minister come from one of those two events – particularly weddings. Few human events are more weighted emotionally than weddings. Parents often invest heavily – time, energy, creativity, resources, love and hope – in the marriage ceremony for a beloved son or daughter. But because they are so loaded with emotional content – weddings can actually be 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 often 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 – very few weddings go off perfectly as planned, without a hitch. And that is often where the clergy stories come in – of rings lost, flowers not delivered, important guests who mislaid directions to the church, flowergirls or ringbearers out of control.

Robert Fulghum, in his book ***‘It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It’*** – speaks of one such occasion. In the story he recounts, it is the mother of the bride who is out of control. He writes, “Normally a polite, reasonable, intelligent and sane human being, the mother was mentally unhinged by the announcement of her daughter’s betrothal. Nobody knew it, but this lady had been waiting with a script for a production that would have met approval with Cecil B. DeMille.” And he goes on to tell of what happens on the day of the wedding …. “The final hour came. Guests in formal attire packed the church. In the choir loft, the orchestra gushed great music. And the mighty MOTB (mother of the bride) coasted down the aisle with the grandeur of an opera diva at a premier performance. Never did the mother of the bride take her seat with more satisfaction. She had done it – she glowed, she beamed, she smiled, and she sighed. Everything was perfect. What she didn’t know is that the bride – to calm her nerves – had been absently walking up and down sampling from the tables of appetizers put out for people to eat while pictures were being taken after the wedding.

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First it was mints, then a few nuts, a cheeseball or two, some little sausages, a couple of shrimps and a cracker piled with liver pate. And to wash this down, her father gave her a glass of pink champagne.” Fulghum then goes on to describe what happened next … “What you noticed as the bride stood in the doorway was not her dress, but her face. White. For what was coming down the aisle was a living grenade with the pin pulled out. You guessed it! The bride threw up – just as she walked by her mother. There was no polite way to put it – she literally hosed down the front of the chancel – hitting 2 bridesmaids, the groom, a ringbearer and me. And all the details were saved for posterity by the 3 video cameras that were rolling.

But after the initial chaos – things and people were cleaned up, words were spoken and the deed was done. They were married. And on their 10th Anniversary, a party was held. Three TV sets were mustered, a feast was laid, and best friends invited. And they watched the video of the wedding from start to finish. It was hilarious. And the best part of the whole thing? Guess who organized it? The MOTB – the mother of the bride.

There is no doubt about it – things seldom go 100% right when it comes to weddings. So it is significant, that near the end of his life, at the time for summing up, Jesus chose this most human, emotionally laden event as the context for a parable about the Kingdom of God. It helps to know that this parable speaks directly to the gospel writer’s community. The early Christian community, to whom Matthew was writing, believed that the Risen Christ would return in their own lifetimes – but after a generation or so of still scanning the skies – their hopes of a quick return were not realized. There was already a delay – and many were beginning to lose hope. It also helps to know a bit about the wedding customs of the day. Weddings in Jesus’ time were every bit as emotionally freighted 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 – lit 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. Jesus, his mother, and his disciples were guests at just such a wedding in Cana of Galilee.

In this parable – for whatever reason – the groom does not show up on time. The hours pass, and many of the waiting 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. But – five of the ten have already used up their oil while they were waiting – and they 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 an easy task at midnight! – and in the process, they miss the procession. When they finally arrive at the groom’s house, they are locked out and dismissed. “Keep awake,” Jesus concludes. “You do not know the day nor the hour.”

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Unlike Matthew’s community – it has been over 2000 years since Jesus lived and died. What, then – are we 21st Centuries Christians to make of this parable? On the face of it – this is a very difficult and challenging parable. It seems to challenge many of the things we believe about God. Is this really how we define a wise person – as someone who only takes care of him or herself? Are there really, in God’s eyes – some people who are in and some who are out?

Of course – the parable doesn’t say whether the bridesmaids had any oil at home. It simply doesn’t give us those details. Its only concern is what they brought with them when they left the house. 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 how much oil you have. Maybe this is a story about the oil you carry with you. 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. We all know what it means to run out of oil. If a 2 year old doesn’t get a nap – she is going to crash. When you haven’t had a conversation with your spouse in 3 weeks that hasn’t revolved around carpooling or where the kids need to be next – or the weather – your marriage is in danger of running dry. If you have worked sixty hour weeks for longer than you care to know – there’s no doubt about it – your relationships are going to suffer. If you eat junk food for twenty years – your body is going to let you know about it. It’s not really something any of us can avoid. There are some kinds of fuel that are just not negotiable.

There are also some kinds of oil you can’t borrow from anyone else. Many teenagers learn this at some point. You can borrow someone else’s homework and get by on an assignment – but that’s not going to help you on the final exam. You can’t borrow the hours put in studying for a test. There are some kinds of preparation you can only do for yourself.

And 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 faith. You can’t say to your friend, “You have such a happy marriage. Could you give me some of that for mine?” It just doesn’t work. You have to find it for yourself. You have to figure out what fills you up, spiritually – and then make sure you have enough to carry you through – particularly in the dry times, the waiting times, the anxious times, the dark times.

Because - here’s the thing – we ***will*** run out. Time will run out. The hour gets late, everyone gets sleepy. We all doze – we all put things off, saying, “One of these days, I’m going to quit working so hard – so that I have some quality time for my kids, my spouse, my relationships.” “One of these days, I’m going to take up painting again – I’ve always wanted to do that.” “One of these days, I’m going to stop just writing cheques and really get involved at First United, or with the refugee committee.”

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“*One of these days* ….” We all doze. We all put things off. We think we have all the time in the world to mend a relationship, to achieve an important goal, to discontinue a bad habit – or begin a new good one, to take care of ourselves, to develop our relationship with God, to take a stand, to show we care. And then – one of these days becomes today – and we discover that we’ve lost the opportunity. We never did get around to bringing that flask of oil with us. I think that’s one of the hardest things about this parable. The time will come for all of us when we have to draw on the oil we have right here, right now. And it isn’t going to come from our good intentions or our long range plans – or someone else. Its going to have to come from what we have stored up spiritually along the way. When we find ourselves getting older and not able to do what we used to do, when our friends and loved ones get sick – or we do; when our children are gone suddenly and the house echoes with the silence of laughter that used to be; when we lose our job …. That’s when we will need to depend on the oil we have stored up – the faith we have nurtured – the love we have cherished. It’s not something anyone else can give us. This parable reminds us that we need to seize the day, and not put off what is important in our lives. Don’t wait – or we may find, like the bridesmaids, that time has run out and opportunities may be lost for good. Each of us here today needs to take a close look at ourselves and our circumstances and figure out what that means in our lives. We all need to do an oil check!

As much as it is perhaps more comforting to slide into our pews on Sunday morning and hear words of hope and peace and joy and love – occasionally, we all need a good kick in the you-know-where – like this morning’s parable. A wake up call. A prod to take a good look at ourselves and our lives. Are we like the wise bridesmaids – or the foolish ones? Have you checked your oil lately?