

November 12, 2017
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

Keep your Oil Ready

Now this parable of the bridesmaids is what they call a cautionary tale. It cautions those who to be prepared for the time when Jesus comes. It warns us to be like the wise bridesmaids. Or else. To bring our extra flask of oil. Or else. Have your lamps ready for the arrival of the bridegroom or you will find yourself shut out of the wedding party. Be prepared or else.

This story is a cautionary tale. It's full of tension and threat and terrible consequences. And we might be bothered by that. We might be bothered by this mean Jesus who shuts people out and claims not to know those who aren't ready for him. It makes this parable hard to listen to. But if we look at the context, then we know why. Things are tense because Jesus is about to die. Things are tense because it's about to get serious. Things are tense because the gospel writer wants the early church to know they have a job to do. As followers of Jesus, we can't be unprepared. We have to be ready to welcome Jesus. Of all people, we are the ones who should be ready. This parable is a cautionary tale, a

lesson to us all as we wait for God. As we wait for a life that is more than the life we know. We are waiting on something more. We are the ones waiting on the Lord with our lights shining in the darkness.

The Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus says, is like this. It's like a bunch of bridesmaids waiting for the groom to arrive at the wedding so the party can begin. We are waiting on Jesus; and waiting on that celebration that comes with him. For that time when life will be full and complete. It has been God's promise throughout the Bible that God will come and take us to be with God forever, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health. God will commit to us like one spouse committing to another. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. God with us and us with God. And then, just like at a wedding, there will be a fantastic celebration. And we are just waiting on that. We are just waiting for that day to arrive.

Jesus says that we are the ones waiting for the party. We are the Bridesmaids, Jesus says, as his followers. Because it was like this, in Jesus' day. The bridesmaids waited outside the brides' house for the groom. Jesus would have seen this. He would have seen this ceremony

taking place. According to tradition, the groom would come to get his bride. With great ceremony, he would come as the sun set to ‘steal her away’ from her family, but not really. And when he came to get her, then the marriage would be completed and the party would begin. But the bridesmaids had a special part in the ceremony. They were to wait outside in the evening with their lamps lit ready to welcome the groom. The bridesmaids were the ones who waited. They were the ones who watched and then welcomed. And that’s our job, Jesus says. That’s the job of the faithful, to be watching and waiting on the Lord like bridesmaids with their lamps lit, waiting for the coming kingdom, waiting for the celebration of new life. Even when it seems to be delayed. Even when it seems like it will never come. Even when the night is long and dark and almost hopeless. We are the ones who wait, shining the light for our Lord.

As followers of Jesus, that’s what we are meant to do. As Bridesmaids, it’s our job to wait on the Lord. It’s our job to have our lamps lit. To have hope and to help others have hope that things will be better, that they can be different. New Testament scholar Caroline Lewis tells a story about

her father-in-law who was a WWII veteran who didn't talk much about his service until the very end of his life. That's when he shared that he didn't go to the front in the war. He was chosen to stay behind at the base because he was good at math. He could calculate multiple ballistic measurements. And as he worked on his equations, he waited for his fellow soldiers, his friends, to return. Some did. And some did not. He was the one who waited. And in the waiting and that wondering, he knew God was there, and there was nothing else he could do but trust in that truth.¹

We wait as followers of Jesus. We are meant to wait. And if we aren't good at waiting, we've got to get good at waiting, even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard. Especially when the night is dark and things are uncertain and we feel hopeless. We wait on the Lord. And that's almost entirely what we do as Christians. We wait on the Lord. We wait for peace that passes all understanding. We wait for joy that comes in the morning. We wait for kindness to make a difference. We wait for

¹ Caroline Lewis, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3413>

reconciliation with our enemies. We wait for goodness to be real to others. We wait for the day to come, and it will come, when God will take life and make all of it abundant and we will have a great big party. If we are doing anything as followers of Jesus, we are waiting on the life that is to come.

But waiting is hard. And most of us don't like it. And some of us try to make it easier by giving Jesus an estimated time of arrival. Like those billboards that you see with the wait time for the Emergency Room in Frankfort. In 12 minutes you can see a doctor. Some want to give us the wait time for the Messiah's return. And they analyze scripture and current events looking for clues to the precise date. How many of us have heard people say they have seen the signs and they know Jesus is coming? Well, people have been saying those things for 2000 years. Ever since Jesus told his disciples that he would come back someday, disciples have been trying to figure out when. And that's why Jesus tells this parable. It's why he has been talking about it through the chapter in Matthew just before this. Because the disciples have been asking about Jesus' return. And when would it be? And how would they know? And

what would be the signs? And Jesus gives them some cryptic and mostly terrifying answers. But what he tells them, is that without a doubt, they will need to be ready to wait. And the world will need their light in the darkness. It will need a faithful group of people with their lamps lit, defying the night, offering hope that God has not given up. And that God still wants to come for us.

And that's Jesus' message to us today. To the bridesmaids. The ones waiting on the Lord. You are the ones waiting on behalf of the world. Because you know there is something worth waiting for. A love that has loved us since the very beginning. A love greater than we can imagine. A love that will give everything to be with us and give its life for us. That will love us to the cross and to the grave, and all the way to death and beyond. As people of faith, we tell the world that that love is coming. And we're ready to welcome its arrival.

So we have to be ready. We can't fall down on the job. We are the ones who need to be prepared to do this one beautiful thing for God because of all God has done for us. We wait on Jesus with that light of hope. We hope in God's faithfulness. We hope in God's goodness. We hope in the

power of God's mercy, not the power of money or guns or political influence. We are waiting on the Lord with our lamps lit.

If we are wise, we will have that extra flask of oil, according to the parable. We want to keep our lamps burning, so we need to make sure we have the fuel. And that's what we do here together, we make sure we are fueled up to shine the light in the darkness. We make sure we have the reserves to welcome the Lord. Last Sunday, in Sunday School, we were talking about how hard it is to have faith sometimes. And Bud told us about some interesting ideas from the corporate world, that it's not just time or money which are limited resources. But our attention and our mental energy are too. And you can only do so many things and solve so many problems before that energy in you is spent. So you should do all your hardest thinking in the morning. Maybe after a big cup of coffee. Because there is only so much energy in our tanks. And if we aren't careful, we won't have it for what matters most.

Jesus tells us when have to be prepared with a reserve. Otherwise we will run out. Maybe like me, you feel depleted sometimes. You don't feel like you have enough to have patience. Or peace. Or hope. Your

energy has been all used up. Maybe you get sucked into social media or TV shows. Maybe you get bogged down in worrying about what he said or what she said or what you should have said. Maybe you worry about the state of the world or our country. Maybe you are worn out by medical problems or taking care of the problems of others. And all the oil for your lamp is gone. You don't even have enough energy to pray for others or even for yourself.

As followers of Jesus, we are the bridesmaids, waiting on the Lord. And Jesus says we need to make sure we have a reserve prepared. We need to have a little extra on hand. For those days, we need to be patient. For the times we need to be gracious. For the days when it's dark and we want to despair. We need to expect to shine the light for the least and the last and the lost.

We need to protect that reserve of oil. First, I think that means that we do less. We do less of the busy work. Less running around. And less doing and doing and doing. And think about what matters. We think about who we are and who we are in Christ. Not who the world tells us we are. And we consciously live our lives that way. Because Jesus says

we are the bridesmaids. We are the ones who hold out hope, who hold out the light. And if others see us hoping in the power of love, then they just might have hope too. So how do we reserve enough fuel for that?

What do we need to say NO to? What do we need to limit? Can we let others find their own fuel instead of letting them consume ours?

Everyday, how can we make sure we are being beacons for the bridegroom in the world?

Maybe we do less. But we also do more. Maybe we allow more time to be with God. Maybe we allow more grace in our relationships with others. We allow more room for God to work. Because we aren't just wait FOR the Lord but we are waiting ON the Lord. Like a waiter waiting on a table. Being attentive. Listening. Watching. Paying attention. We wait on the Lord with heart and mind and spirit. We look for God's justice. We look for God's abundant life for all. We look for the Kingdom that is to come. We anticipate it. That's what we do here together when we pray and sing and confess and forgive, when we study and baptize and share the Lord's supper. We do these things not because they are busy work or time-fillers while we twiddle our thumbs and wait.

We do these things because they remind us how we wait and why we wait. They sustain us and refresh us. They give us the fuel so we can shine the light for One who is to come. Like we are supposed to. Like we are meant to.²

As followers of Christ, we are the ones who wait on the Lord. And in the darkest night, we are to have our lamps lit. With oil in reserve. So we will be ready for the bridegroom, ready to welcome love, ready to share our hope. We are the bridesmaids, waiting on the Lord, who will come for us, who won't give up on us, who will love us to the end and give his life for us. So that we may come into celebrate the joy of eternal life.

² Matthew Skinner, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-l-skinner/we-better-get-to-work_b_6093642.html