

Fill 'Er Up!  
Matt. 25:1-13  
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In one of my favorite *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoons, Calvin walks into the room wearing – picture this in your mind – a large space helmet, a long superhero cape, carrying a flashlight in one hand and a baseball bat in the other. His mom looks at his get-up and says, “So, what’s up today?” Calvin replies, “Nothing so far.” “So far?” she asks. “Well you never know,” he says. “Something could happen today.” As he leaves his mom says, “I need a suit like that!”

Calvin was living out the time-tested axiom to “be prepared.” This is more than just a Boy Scout motto or insurance company slogan. As we see in today’s passage, “keep awake,” which can also be translated as “be prepared,” is a command from Jesus himself. But here’s what I want to know: Prepared for what? If you ask Calvin, he seems like he’s prepared for just about anything, from a blackout to a baseball game to a moon landing. But what is Jesus telling us we are supposed to be prepared for?

This parable is hard. As one commentator says, it’s odd, it’s ominous, and it’s archaic. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven will be like ten bridesmaids waiting for the groom to arrive for a wedding, who is delayed in coming. He must have taken Nicholasville Road at rush hour. While waiting, all ten fall asleep. When they awaken to the news that the groom is coming, five of them have lamps that went out, while the others’ are still burning because they brought enough oil. When the five foolish bridesmaids ask the five wise ones to borrow oil, they are told there’s not enough, so the foolish ones have to go in search of more oil. Feels a bit stingy, right? Kinda anti-loaves and fishes. While they are gone, the groom arrives and invites the five wise bridesmaids into the party. When the foolish return with oil and knock on the door, the groom says he doesn’t know them and shuts the door on them. And everybody lives uncomfortably ever after.

Usually, when we read one of Jesus’ parables, we’re invited to see ourselves in it, or at least who Jesus is calling us to be. For example, we should strive to be the good Samaritan who stops to help someone, the prodigal son who turns around and comes back home, the father who welcomes his wayward child with open arms. So, who are we supposed to be in this parable? Because, to be honest, I’m having trouble finding anyone to whom I want to relate.

I don’t want to be the foolish bridesmaids, who aren’t prepared and miss the arrival of the groom. I don’t want to be the wise bridesmaids, because they refuse to share their oil with their friends. And I don’t want to be the groom, because he shows up late and shuts out five of his friends from the party. Maybe I could be the minister performing the wedding?

To better understand the harshness of this parable, we need to situate it in the context of Matthew’s gospel. It occurs in chapter 25, and there are only 28 chapters in Matthew, so we know we’re close to the end. This parable is sandwiched in between two others that also emphasize preparation for the master’s return. In a sense, Jesus is giving his followers a final exam before his crucifixion. He’s telling them he’s going to come again, and this time, they better be ready. Something could happen today. Either be prepared or be left behind.

One time while I was on vacation, I worshipped at East Second Street Christian Church, not knowing that it was the celebration of Rev. Dr. Don Gillett’s 19<sup>th</sup> year at East Second Street. It was a big celebration, including lots of music and a guest preacher. I was excited to hear who it was going to be, so imagine my surprise when I walked in and one of the ushers shook my

hand and asked, “Oh, are you our guest preacher today?” You know those anxiety dreams you have the night before something big like, say, a sermon, where you dream that you get to church and you’ve completely forgotten that you were supposed to preach? Well, dreams do come true! Thankfully, I was NOT the guest preacher that morning, but for a moment, I was afraid I had shown up not prepared.

This is an anxiety-producing parable. Jesus tells us to keep awake, to be prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom, a metaphor for the second coming of Jesus. That warning carried a lot of power for the first decade or so after the crucifixion. But Matthew is writing at least 30 years after that, so the urgency to be prepared has lost its edge. In the parable, Jesus notes the bridegroom has been delayed, but that shouldn’t keep us from waiting expectantly and being prepared, because something could happen today. And yet, after only 30 years, Jesus’ followers were getting a bit drowsy waiting for him.

So, how are we doing 2000 years later? Do we still feel the expectation that Jesus could come at any time? To be honest, I think we have stopped waiting. We’ve grown accustomed to life the way it is, so this parable doesn’t carry much weight for us. Every year before Christmas we have a season of waiting called Advent, when we live out the expectancy of the birth of the Christ child, which is a foreshadowing of the arrival of Jesus a second time. But how well does that message about waiting and anticipation get through the jingling bells and pretty packaging of the season? We’ve stopped waiting. Now, if Jesus had been born in August we could have avoided competing with Christmas. What does it mean to be prepared for something when you’re not sure it’s even going to happen?

This story is a great reminder that, even when a story in the Bible seems to have lost its applicability, there is still truth there to be heeded. I will admit there are parts of this parable that I fundamentally disagree with, and I have to wrestle with that, and that’s OK. I don’t accept a picture of Jesus that permanently closes the door on anyone. That’s not the God I worship. I know Jesus was trying to make a point about being prepared, but the foolish bridesmaids don’t just stand around in the dark, they make an effort to get more oil. I don’t like the fact that the wise bridesmaids are rewarded and yet refuse to share their abundance. I don’t see myself in this parable.

Or do I? What I also have to admit is that I’ve been the wise bridesmaid that refused to share the abundance I have. I’ve been the groom who has shut people out of my life because they didn’t act like I thought they should. And I’ve been the foolish bridesmaid who wasn’t prepared to act when Jesus showed up in my life. I may not believe in being prepared for a second coming, but that doesn’t mean I still shouldn’t be prepared, because something may happen today, Jesus may show up, in my life and I don’t want to miss it.

That’s the truth I take away from this story today. The warning to keep awake may feel like it no longer applies to a literal second coming, but it does still apply to the other ways Jesus appears to us. Maybe the message today, 2000 years later after it was first shared, is not so much that we should be waiting expectantly for Jesus to arrive again, but instead that we should keep awake for the ways that Jesus shows up in our waiting. Because, as we all know, it’s hard to wait.

I think about people like the Makolas and the Mlombis, two refugee families we had the honor of serving through Kentucky Refugee Ministries as they established their new home here in Lexington. They came here after spending decades in refugee camps. Let that sink in. Decades. Can you imagine? Personally, I get impatient when the line at Panera is too long. Some

of us have lost power for hours. And some of us spent 22 years in a refugee camp. Waiting can be really, really hard.

And yet, Jesus shows up in the midst of our waiting. In interpreting this scripture for myself, I choose to balance the disturbing picture of the groom who shuts the door with the words of Jesus from Matthew 7: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, everyone who seeks finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

So our responsibility is to keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking. Because, as we all know, there will be times in our lives when the waiting gets tough, and our lights run low, and the flame of hope inside of us flickers and dims. And when that happens, we need to have a reserve of oil from which to draw. We can be prepared by continuing to seek Jesus in our lives so that our spiritual reserves don't run out. Because something could happen today.

You see, the stark reality is that no one can make it on another person's oil. We might be tempted to chastise the wise bridesmaids for not being willing to share their oil. But we can make it through life on borrowed faith. There are certain things that can't be obtained at the last minute. If we continue neglecting our spiritual life and relationship with Christ, I'm afraid that when we need a flame to help light the darkness we may not find enough there to make even a spark.

But if we keep buying oil, week after week, year after year, we'll find that we've built up a reserve that will last us through even the longest, darkest periods of waiting. Regardless of when Jesus is coming, we know for a fact that tomorrow is coming. And with Calvin, we can all say truthfully, “You never know.” We need to have strength and courage for tomorrow, and we don't get that at the last minute, as if we're cramming for a final exam. No, that strength and courage comes from our commitment to filling our lamps with the oil that comes from prayer, reading Scripture, worship, giving, service. Each day we have the opportunity to add oil to our lamps. Every choice we make, every interaction with another person is an opportunity to add to our reserves. Each time we make a choice to live as followers of Jesus first, to put our faith at the front of our lives, another drop of oil goes into the lamp.

I don't believe we choose to let our lights burn out. I believe, like the 10 bridesmaids, we all start out with oil in our lamps. But it's up to us to be intentional about keeping them filled. We make like to think we know what's going to happen, but really, does any of us know? We may want to live planned lives, but we're better off living prepared lives. Are we prepared? Something could happen today. And when it does – because we know it will, either today or another day – let's remember to ask, to seek, to knock, and to trust. We can't do this live by ourselves. Remember: Christ is there with us.