

“Tending to the Light”

A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork

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Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Lesson: Matthew 25:1-13

Gracious God, may the light of your love shine upon us, in us, and through us in this time of worship. May our spirits ignite with hope, joy, and renewed commitment to share your love and light with all we meet. Amen.

Many of the biblical texts talk about wisdom. There are entire books that are classed as “wisdom literature” including the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The Wisdom of Solomon is an apocryphal book named for the king of ancient Israel who was known for his wisdom.

Wisdom is lifted up as a virtue that can and should be pursued in this life. And often in these texts, wisdom is contrasted with foolishness, as is the case in today’s parable.

Jesus was a teacher of wisdom. He knew the wisdom literature of his own Jewish tradition well and carried forth their call to be wise.

So, in this parable we have these ten bridesmaids. They were young, unmarried women who had an important role in the wedding celebration. Their job was to meet the groom at a designated location. Once he arrived, they would escort him to the bride’s house to pick her up. Then they would escort the happy couple to the home where the wedding ceremony and banquet would take place.

So, their first job was to wait. And, as it seems that this was an evening wedding, they take their lamps with them to go meet the groom. Five of them wisely bring extra flasks of oil for their lamps. And five of them foolishly do not. And so, they wait for the groom.

One of my college professors wisely taught us not to try to “solve” parables, not to rush too quickly to an interpretation that is beyond the text. Yes, the historical context is important. Yes, the theological messages are important. And yes, there are some interpretations that may be better than others. And we’ll get there eventually. But he encouraged us to first sit with the parable. Hear and absorb it as a story. Pay attention to what it does to us. Listen for what reactions and feelings arise for us.

So, honestly, one of the things this parable does to me is annoy me. This groom is late!

I’ve been a bride, been a bridesmaid, and officiated several weddings. When a member of the wedding party is late, it stresses everyone out! I’ve never had a really late groom, but I did once have a co-officiant who showed up halfway through the ceremony because we finally, after some time and some tears, decided to start without him.

This groom is late! Not just a little late; this dude is really late. I guarantee you that this wedding was supposed to start long before midnight.

And so, I also feel compassion for these bridesmaids. They wait so long into the night for this guy to show up that they all fall asleep.

Finally, they are startled awake from their slumber when he arrives. It's time to light up the lamps and get this show on the road. But, of course, half of them have run out of oil.

I have sympathy for the bridesmaids that ran out. They weren't planning on being there so long.

Now we might be inclined to think that the bridesmaids who did bring extra oil are being stingy in not sharing with the others. It seems kind of mean. But the story implies that they are just being practical. There simply isn't enough oil to go around; not if their lamps are to stay lit for the rest of the wedding festivities.

So, those who have run out must go buy some oil. And apparently there is an olive oil mini-mart or something that is open all night because they are successful.

But unfortunately, by the time they return, the groom and the other bridesmaids have already gone off to the wedding banquet. And when they finally get there, they find the door shut and locked tight.

And so, the parable ends with this unsettling and harsh encounter as the bridesmaids beg to be let in, but the groom responds, "I don't know you."

What?! After all he put them through, he isn't going to let them in! What do we do with this ending? Sure, they weren't as wisely prepared as the Boy Scout Bridesmaids. But they fixed the problem and now they are there to join the party. Where's the mercy? Where's the forgiveness? Where's the apology for making them wait so long in the first place?

This parable infuriates me.

And you know, I have to wonder if that was intentional. Often Jesus' parables and teachings have some kind of twist, something unexpected, that shocks us, wakes us up, makes us pay attention.

"Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour," Jesus said.

Images of wedding banquets and feasts are used throughout the Bible to illustrate the fulfillment of the Reign of God – that hopeful vision of heaven on earth – a peaceful, just, and joyful celebration where all are welcomed, all are fed, and all have a place at the table.

And, like those poor bridesmaids who had to wait so long into the night, we are still waiting. Still waiting for this vision to become a full reality. It can feel like we're still waiting to get even just a little bit closer to this vision. In the midst of war and so much strife and struggle, a hopeful future can feel so far away.

I think Jesus' followers felt this way too. Waiting is hard.

And so, one of the messages of this parable is that waiting is necessary sometimes. It may be out of our control. So, the question becomes how do we wait well? How do we wait wisely?

If this story urges us to be wise rather than foolish, how do we do that?

Well, I guess we first ought to stock up on oil for our lamps. Keep enough at the ready so we can keep our lamps lit even in the darkest night. We ought to learn something from the wise Boy Scout

Bridesmaids and fill up our flasks and take them with us wherever we go. So we always have enough to last the night. So, even when life's challenges don't go our way or don't get resolved on our timeline, we can still refill, refuel, and keep our lamp lit.

What is your oil? What fuels you? Spiritually, physically, mentally, in all dimensions of your life. What do you need to keep your light shining bright? What brings you hope? What restores you when you are feeling weary? What inspires you? What gives you a sense of purpose and a reason to get up in the morning? What gives you the strength and endurance to do difficult things?

The good news is that God is in the fuel business and has plenty in stock. You don't have to run at the last minute to the midnight minimart for a tiny flask. Stock up now and return any time. The warehouse store is open, and you can get a giant jug (the large and inconvenient size, as my mother-in-law likes to say).

There is plenty of fuel to be found. Just go to the source. Soak up God's abundant and steadfast love like a wick soaks up oil so you can keep shining your light. We need your light.

When the foolish bridesmaids ran out of fuel, they missed the opportunity to be a part of the wedding party. They missed their moment. The wise bridesmaids realized that their role was essential, that they weren't just standing on the sidelines, but they were there to do the important work of lighting the way and ushering in the celebration. So, they prepared for this role, no matter how long it might take.

This story isn't just about waiting for a brighter future somewhere down the road. It's also about being attentive to the present moment. It's about being prepared, ready, and willing to respond to today's opportunities and challenges with love. It's about how we tend to the light now in an effort to both make a difference in this moment and to nurture a brighter future.

But in order to do that, we have to have enough fuel to keep going. And we have to keep our eyes peeled for those glimpses of God's Kingdom, God's Kin-dom in our midst. So that when an opportunity presents itself to help usher in more love, more peace, more hope – we can jump into action, trim our lamps, and help lead the way.

And the light of love is needed right now in so many ways. Where and how are you called to shine? How will you tend to the light this day, this week, this year?

If you need some ideas, Jesus gave us some good ones. He fed people. He saw to their healing and wellbeing. He stood with those on the margins. He challenged the status quo when it needed to be changed for the better. He was unafraid of looking foolish to the powerful (which tells us something about true wisdom). He taught anyone who would listen that they were loved and had love to give.

We know from experience that this work of tending to the light can be rewarding and life-giving. And it can also be challenging at times.

Part of the wisdom of preparation is that it encourages us to build up the stores of faith and love to keep going in the tougher times. We must, for example, tap into our spiritual reserves so we can persist in peacemaking. We are called to be peacemakers, but it is hard work. When peace is so often delayed, when hostility and violence flair up, when it can feel like maybe there has been some kind of progress over the course of human history, but then something blows up and we feel like we have fallen back to square one again. Being a peacemaker for years, decades, a lifetime, is deeply demanding. And

yet, there are people who persist in seeking peace, who have dedicated their lives to peacemaking, because their lives depend upon it and their understanding of love and human dignity demands it.

After this latest war began in Israel and Gaza, I learned about a peacemaking organization called Roots that is based in the West Bank. It is a collaborative effort made up of both Israeli and Palestinian peace activists. On October 15 they held the first of a couple of virtual presentations about how they were persisting in being “peacemakers at a time of war.” The Israeli founder, Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger, and one of his Palestinian colleagues, Noor Awad, both spoke.

And they were honest about the difficulties they faced. They shared their profound heartbreak, grief, and worry. They shared their concerns about the future of their people and their homeland (a land they believe belongs to both peoples). And they candidly shared that there were some disagreements among leaders within their organization about how Israel should be responding to the violence perpetrated by Hamas.

And yet, they also shared how they aren’t giving up on peace. They know that peacemaking is a long, long process. They have been living it. They have made it their life’s work. And they have found their particular niche. Though they have a vision and ideas for a political solution, their primary mission is to foster a “grassroots movement of understanding, nonviolence, and transformation among Israelis and Palestinians.” Understanding, nonviolence, and transformation. They pursue this primarily by bringing people together for dialogue to really listen and hear each other’s stories and to build trusting relationships over time. They believe that any political solution will only be possible and sustainable if there is work done on a people-to-people level. And I was surprised to learn about the breadth of the political spectrum of people that they have succeeded in bringing into conversation with one another. It’s deeply hard and holy work.

Since the latest violence erupted, they have had to pivot to meeting on Zoom instead of in person because of the various security blockades that Israel has enacted in the West Bank, but they are still meeting. As the West Bank has become more volatile in these recent weeks, they have been reaching out to their various colleagues and program participants to urge them to be voices of calm, de-escalation, and non-violence within their own communities. They have also been providing food, medications, and other essentials to Palestinians who are blockaded within the West Bank (unable to leave home, unable to work) as well as to Israelis who have been displaced from the south. And they have been calling upon all of their community members, and indeed anyone who will listen, to reject hate and to model respect and care for all persons in the way they talk and post on social media about the conflict.

Despite the extreme difficulties of this moment in history, they are still pursuing their mission of peacemaking. They must have a lot of oil in their reserves to keep their lamps lit in this time.

But that is what we are all called to do. Each in our own way.

So, let us continue to build up the spiritual reserves to tend to the light and keep our lamps lit, burning with a flame that no wind, no war, no force of death and destruction can blow out.

And maybe in doing so we’ll edge this world just a little closer to that great banquet, that great wedding feast, where all are welcome, all are fed, and all are at peace.

Amen.