

Lent in Plain Sight: Oil
Fifth in a Lenten Series
...they took jars of oil to feed their lamps. Matt. 25:4
April 3, 2022
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Intro:

It's not about what you serve, it is about having the heart to share a meal.
It's not about what you get in return, it is about how you give what you have.
It's not about having all the answers, it is about asking the right questions.

It's not about being better than, it is about being with.
It's not about honor and shame, it is about humility and compassion.
It's not about us and them, it is about all.

It's not about a one-and-done decision, it is a lifelong pursuit.
It's not about being the fastest and the best, it is about being present.
It's not about being the head of the table, it is about making room at the table for all.

If it's not what we think it is - if it is not what so many in our world make it out to be, then what is it? What is the Kingdom of God and how do we know it when we see it? How do we live it? How do we anticipate and expect its presence? How do we prepare for it?

Prayer: Reveal to us how your kingdom works God, and bring us greater awareness to be a part of it every day. Amen.

Message:

Humanity is very talented in making a mess of things. We seem to have a knack for making things harder or more complicated than necessary, and a skillset that thrives on comparison and competition. Like a well-oiled machine, we feel better and work more efficiently when we keep things, ideas, and people divided according to any number of attributes: money, influence, skin color, power, talent, education level, gender, mental health. We feel our strongest when we keep God, others, and ourselves in a box on a shelf, or fractured along various lines of tradition, progress, politics, economics, and theology. That is the "kingdom system" we have created and that we operate out of day in and day out.

How is that working out for us at this point? How well has that served us - all of us, in the past? What kind of system will that leave for future generations? I don't have to try very hard to convince you or help you realize our current system is not what God intended it to be.

That is not to say humanity does not have its moments of doing better, of putting others first, and of helping one another. In general however, here and around the world, we operate from and exist in a system of honor, shame, competition, greed, power, division, and fear. That is not the kind of kingdom we were created for.

That is why everything Jesus did was a message, lesson, or example of the Kingdom of God - the kind of community God intended for us to be then and now. The kind of human beings God intended us to be. The kind of kingdom that Jesus showed us was and is possible.

From the first day Jesus called them to "come and follow," Jesus had one objective for his disciples: believe in who he was (and is) and live out his ways - share his message and good news. If they could fully embrace and carry out that objective they would be living examples of the Kingdom of God and those around them would see the kind of community God intended all along.

When teaching, Jesus drew upon the people, places, and practices that the disciples would have been familiar with, and revealed to them a new way to understand the concept of community - a new way to be God's community. Using objects, events, and scenarios common to them Jesus gave them a new way to understand who their neighbor was, what true hospitality looked like, how servanthood would turn hierarchy upside down, and how authority, sacrifice, and eternal life were all connected in Christ.

We call them parables and Jesus used this method to tell stories that contained lessons around how to live as a follower of Jesus. These stories are found throughout the New Testament in the books we call the gospels; Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

There are many well-known parables. For example, the mustard seed, salt and light, the lost coin, the lost sheep, the prodigal son, the sower and the seeds, the rich young ruler, and so on. But there is one parable you may not be as familiar with. It is tucked away in the midst of two other challenging parables, in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew.

It comes in a section of scripture known as the “judgment discourse,” (NIB) which right away makes some readers uncomfortable and others defensive. Yet, all that means is that it is found in a section in which Jesus criticized the religious leaders, challenged the rules and ways of thinking that limited God’s love, presence, and forgiveness to an elite few, and warned people, primarily those in the church, to stop playing games with their faith and instead always be ready to encounter Jesus - always be ready to encounter God’s work now and in the future.

The passage I want to read today challenges us to consider how we prepare to be in the presence of Jesus and how we look for and anticipate the presence of Jesus now and in the future.

Hear these words and with God’s help, may we all come to understand.

READ Matt. 25:1-13

Immediately people want to make this parable about the coming of Jesus, at the end of time. They want to make it about who gets in and who gets left out. What if there is more to it than that? What if it goes deeper than that? What if it is a both/and and not an either/or kind of lesson? What if it is meant only to get our attention and challenge us to think about how we are using our spiritual oil - that which fuels us to keep on keeping on in the work of God? How do we remain ready for those key moments of our faith journey?

I appreciate N.T. Wright’s take on this parable: this story is rooted in the Jewish tradition of contrasting wisdom and foolishness. Much like the writer of Proverbs, here in this story wisdom and foolishness are represented in the young women. Wright goes on to say, “It is probably wrong to try and guess what the oil in the story “stands for” (some suggest that it means good works; faith, or love)” (133). You can’t squash all these parables together and make the details fit with each other. In other words, although there are three parables in this section all related to being ready, we cannot assume the details of each match up.

When we approach this parable with western eyes it may seem unrealistic and completely made up. However, it doesn’t take much looking to find that around the world, even today, there are cultures in which this wedding scenario could happen. The language would not have been foreign to the hearers of the day. It is feasible that Jesus uses this story to illustrate that he is the bridegroom coming for the church, his bride, and

that the church, those who profess to follow him, must be ready. In some cultures a wedding can last days and days. It is a great occasion and a highly anticipated celebration. All the preparations, expectations, and even apprehension of a new life together. The waiting. The planning. The hoping. The big day. The joyful festivities afterward.

Now think about the church. Think about the life and rhythm of the church. A church cannot sustain itself on potlucks and picnics or on Christmas and Easter alone. Believers cannot persevere on special services or seasonal activities alone. We must be fueled throughout the year, every day, every week, every month. All the planning, preparation, organizing, rehearsing, and energy put into one special moment does not a church make. A momentary mountain top moment, heightened emotion, a powerful prayer, stirring music, or a single profound insight, a lifetime supply of faith does not provide.

When someone becomes a Christian it is often the same way. There are those who have been waiting and praying for the day to come for their loved one, friend, family member, student, or acquaintance to accept Jesus; praying, hoping, anticipating, supporting, nurturing that person along. Then it happens, the moment of acceptance. The moment of owning their faith as their own for the first time. A time to celebrate, give thanks with joyful recognition of God's faithfulness. A time for baptism. A time for food, out of town guests, maybe music, or an outing to mark the occasion. Then what? What happens next? Where is the lasting fuel?

Far too many times in the western church and in Christian circles, that is it. But without follow up, preparedness, discipleship, growth, and intentionality, the oil runs out and while we are scrambling to find more, or focussing only on the end goal and not the process, or running from one thing to the next to the next in search of answers, we miss it. We need to keep our lamps and the lamps of others full - so that we do not miss those moments when Jesus passes by; when God's divinity brushes up against our humanity and we find a way through that we hadn't seen before, or we come to understand another way of doing and being or we see the kind of community Jesus intended us to be.

What happened right before this parable? In chapters twenty-two and twenty-three, Jesus is challenged again and again by the Pharisees, Sadducees and other religious uppity-ups, all trying to trap him into saying something that would either get him arrested or lose the loyalty of his followers. They put him on the spot with questions

about paying taxes, divorce laws, the resurrection of the dead, and who the real messiah is.

At the end of chapter twenty-two, we read a big then. Up to this point Jesus was speaking to the religious leaders. His focus shifts at the end of chapter twenty-two where we read, “Then, Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses, so practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example” (23:1-3). For thirty-seven more verses Jesus tells the crowds and the disciples how wrong, disillusioned, blinded by power and greed, and how hypocritical the religious leaders were and how all of it breaks the heart of God. That is why at the end of chapter twenty-three, Jesus wept over Jerusalem - over the people of God.

In chapter twenty-four, to the disciples, Jesus foretells the future of what was going to happen to him, to the disciples, and what they will be witness to. After forty-seven verses of explanation, and after everything he had already said to the religious leaders, Jesus says, “so you must keep watch.” In other words, it was as if Jesus said, “that is why you need to pay attention and always be ready.” He doesn’t want them to miss it; he doesn’t want them to miss the key moment, perhaps the defining moment of their spiritual life.

I tell you all that to give you the bigger picture of what Jesus was doing and that was, showing his followers the flaws in the system - in the kingdom that humanity designed, the price he was willing to pay to make it right again, and how it was up to them, his followers, to prepare, watch, and be willing to go the long haul.

The Kingdom of God is both now and not yet. It is both judgment and grace; struggle and peace; tradition and progress; brokenness and healing; being lost and being found. The Kingdom of God is both physical and spiritual.

Throughout this season of Lent, we have been given the opportunity to see God in plain sight and realize that things like dust, bread, the cross, coins, shoes, and oil can bring us closer to comprehending the Kingdom of God. Today, at this table may we once again look, listen, let go, hold on, be emptied, and be filled with nothing but the goodness, beauty, and truth of Jesus.

Amen.