

Introductory

This material is exclusive to Matthew. It is the reading appointed for Trinity 27 in the TLH one-year lectionary. In LW, it is the reading for The Last Sunday in the Church Year and an alternative for Pentecost 24A. It comes in the middle of an apocalyptic sermon preached in response to the question about His coming asked Jesus by His disciples at the beginning of chapter twenty-four.

Have you ever run out of gas? It's a really silly thing to do, isn't it, to run out of gas. I mean, it's not like there's a shortage of gas stations or anything. There's a gas station right down the block, one in Calamus, one in Welton, several in DeWitt, all kinds of them in Clinton and Davenport. You stop and think about it, there is no good reason why you should ever run out of gas.

And it's not like you have to pull the vehicle over, unscrew the gas cap, and stick a stick down there to see how much gas you have left. Cars and trucks have had a gas gauge for nearly the last hundred years – 1922 – and to check to see how much gas you have left; all you have to do is glance down and to the left. You can do it while you're driving. One time, I ran out of gas.

Many years ago, about 10:00 in the morning, I was on Constitution Avenue, just off of North Powers, in Colorado Springs. It was highly embarrassing to have to make that phone call to the father of one of my students, and our daughters were friends. I made it, he came right over with some gas, and he laughed about it and told me that the same thing had happened to him one time.

I decided right then and there that this would never happen again. I would never again have to make that phone call. I would never again run out of gas, and I haven't. Others who have run out of gas have told me the same thing; you only run out of gas once in a given lifetime, and because it's so embarrassing and silly, you never want to make that phone call again, and you don't.

If I might be so bold as to talk about preaching methodology and Jesus, I think we can learn things about preaching from Jesus, who did a lot of it. Here we see a great example of how Jesus tells them, and then He tells them a story about what He just told them. He does that every now and then. Maybe we should give them the straight scoop and then tell a story teaching the same thing.

As noted above, we find Him here in the middle of a sermon, and He gives them plenty of straight scoop, and He actually tells several stories, and right before this (24:44), He has told them “Therefore, you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” I think we preachers should tell them, and then tell a story or stories about what we just told them.

Speaking of methodology, we also find Jesus often using familiar things as the setting for His stories. Two of the most often used and also most familiar to them are agriculture and the wedding. The effect of this is that whenever a hearer of one of these parables saw the thing talked about in the sermon – a field, seed, a vineyard – the words preached in that sermon would come to mind.

It’s the reason why I tell stories about combines, legs, fields, seeds, and weddings in my sermons. Out in the mountain west, I told different stories. Weddings are common to all times and all places, and in many ways, the wedding is the same in almost every culture. But all cultures – including ours – have their own nuance and customs connected to the joining together of a man and a woman.

The same could be said about engagement and marriage customs in the time of Jesus; the Jewish wedding in the time of Jesus is similar to, but different from our weddings. To understand this parable, which would have been understood by His hearers, we should have some understanding about just what those hearers would have understood the meaning of this parable to have been.

Particularly, we need to understand the part about the lamps and the part about the bridegroom – we would call him the “groom” – coming. The parents of the bride and groom would have arranged the marriage at some point in the past, and when it was time, the preparations would be made, like in the Parable of the Wedding Feast. The groom would at some point leave home.

The bride was in the home of her father, and a lamp would have been among the things kept by the bedside as she awaited her groom. Her bridesmaids would be with her. The groom – we can stop using the word KJV and LBT word “bridegroom” – would come to the house of his bride’s father, and as he approached the shofar would be blown, announcing the presence of the groom.

He would then take her to a pre-selected and prepared bridal chamber (chuppah) and the bridesmaids and groomsmen would wait outside. When the marriage had been consummated and the bloody cloth examined and displayed, then it was time for the festivities. Around these parts, the reception is almost always held at Buzzy’s, and likely there were places like that in those parts.

Like around here, the size and scope of the festivities depend on several factors, primarily the wealth of the father of the bride. In that time, as you already know, the festivities may have lasted even for several days. Here, it may be a long day, but we generally keep it all on one day. It also seems like some of the ordering and details are a bit different, but that’s the Internet for you.

The Jewish Encyclopedia talks a lot about oil, and you could spend a lot of words talking about oil, and you could even allegorize in any number of directions, but I won't be doing that. Olive oil was abundant and useful in first century Palestine. It was used mostly for cooking – we almost exclusively use olive oil for our cooking – and as is the case in this story, used as for fuel for lamps.

The parable is one of several things that Jesus said to His disciples in response to their question about the coming of the Kingdom. The point of this parable, and of most of His response to that question, is readiness; you don't know when the time is coming, so be ready all the time, and if you're not ready, then it won't go well for you. The groom is Jesus, and His Bride is the Church.

That question is the context for the telling of this parable. In response to that question, Jesus talks about signs, He talks about being watchful, He talks about servants who are faithful, or not. All of these things are spoken in mostly the indicative mode – this is the way things are, straight scoop – and then He tells a story. The story says what He has just said, only it's in the form of a story.

Textual Notes

1. He continues, “Τότε ὁμοιωθήσεται ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν δέκα παρθένοις – the Kingdom of the heavens will be like ten virgins.” Looking at what immediately precedes it, the word “Τότε – at that time” places this story in the context of the final judgment. In fact, Jesus has been answering their eschatological question for an entire chapter (24), and He will continue to do that in this one.

That phrase is often used by Jesus to introduce a parable, and this story is about ten young ladies. They are identified by the noun “παρθένος,” a word that occurs fifteen times in the NT, including in reference to Mary (1:23). The word is usually, and correctly translated “virgin,” which means a woman who has never had sexual intercourse with a man, a thing that used to be more common.

In that time and place, to be a young, unmarried woman and to be a virgin were nearly synonymous. A woman simply did not have sex before her wedding night, and to think of having sex with a man she was not going to marry was unthinkable, and they had safeguards in place to make sure of that. It's a concept with which our own culture is increasingly unfamiliar, and even in the Church.

These young ladies, “λαβοῦσαι τὰς λαμπάδας ἑαυτῶν ἐξῆλθον εἰς ὑπάντησιν τοῦ νυμφίου – having taken their lamps, went to meet the bridegroom.” The word “lamp” occurs nine times in the NT, five of them in this story, and looking at the other four times we see the word, it is a general lamp or torch used to light the darkness. As we shall see, these lamps were hand-held and fueled by oil.

2. There were ten of them, and “πέντε δὲ ἐξ αὐτῶν ἦσαν μωραὶ καὶ πέντε φρόνιμοι – five of them were foolish and five wise.” That positive trait φρόνιμοι almost always stands alone, most notably attributed to the Shrewd Steward Luke (16:8). The word describes one who is intelligent, street smart, and who knows how to look out for one’s own interests, which some find to be awkward.

We find it awkward in the Steward when the Master commends him for his “φρόνιμοι.” To be sure, he was dishonest, which isn’t commended, but only his shrewdness. Here, the φρόνιμοι virgins are going to be asked by some of the foolish for their oil, but they will look out for their own self-interest and not give any of their own oil away. Doing so may keep them out of heaven.

We find the opposite in the person described by the word μωραὶ, which comes down to us in the word “moron” and its cognates. In Matthew (7), in the parable of the builders on different soils, these two words are, in fact, used as opposites. The person described by this word is uneducated, not very smart, and not even street smart. The word casts those people in a very negative light.

Here, and in the parable of the Shrewd Steward, Jesus is describing what normal people normally do in certain situations. It was not unusual for somebody like the Steward to do what he did, and it apparently was not unusual for people to run out of oil for their lamps. People run out of gas all the time. Actually, you only do that once, and then you make sure it doesn’t happen again.

We observe that there are many who are not the sharpest tool in the shed, and only one who is, and somebody had to graduate last in his Medical School class. But really, how much intelligence or common sense does it take to make sure your gas tank or your oil lamp doesn’t run out of fuel? Poor planning, procrastination, or in this case they think they can always borrow from the others.

3. That explains why they take their lamps, but “οὐκ ἔλαβον μεθ’ ἑαυτῶν ἔλαιον – they did not take oil with them.” There were almost certainly oil stations along the way as they make their way to their destination, and the hearer might have expected the story to have them stopping at one of them as a matter of course, but they don’t avail themselves of any of those opportunities.

4. The wise likewise took their lamps, but notably they “λαβον ἔλαιον ἐν τοῖς ἀγγείοις μετὰ τῶν λαμπάδων ἑαυτῶν – took oil in their containers with their lamps.” The oil is almost certainly olive oil, and the word for container – what they put the oil into – occurs only here and earlier in Matthew (13:48), where the men with the dragnet sort the fish and put them into different containers.

If you DuckDuckGo “oil lamp in Bible” images, you get a lot of photos of that. Probably some people have seen images like that. Rather than taking precious time to try to explain from the pulpit what kind of lamp we’re talking about, I directed my very efficient Secretary to put an image on the bulletin cover this Sunday. The lamp was designed to be both portable and easily fillable.

5. I always tell the wedding party, and especially the bride, to be on time for the wedding. My daughter was about ten minutes late for her wedding, which is the norm, and what are you going to do? Such a thing is not unusual these days, and probably it was not unusual in those days for “χρονίζοντος δὲ τοῦ νυμφίου – the groom being delayed.” That, I’ve only seen that happen once.

We designate a time for the wedding on the invitation, and people start showing up, and the thing generally starts – sometimes they even start on time! The culture referenced in this story seems to be more like those who – when everybody gets here, we will do this thing. I don’t know how normal it would have been “ἐνύσταξαν πᾶσαι καὶ ἐκάθευδον – they all nodded off and fell asleep.”

The first verb used to describe what happens to all ten ladies only occurs twice in the NT (2 Peter 2:3), likely has its root in “nod.” The word speaks to people who don’t want to go to sleep, who are struggling to stay awake, but... The second verb tells us that they were unsuccessful. Go ahead and talk about that in such a way that your hearers feel the feeling, but do not put them to sleep.

6. KJV and LBT place the time at “midnight,” but the teller of the story that it was “μέσης δὲ νυκτὸς κραυγὴ γέγονεν – in the middle of the night came a cry.” We know the term “in the middle of the night,” and we know what it means. Not just the five foolish, but also the five wise are found sleeping, and the storyteller is speaking descriptively and not in a condemnatory manner.

There was nothing wrong with the women who had sufficient oil sleeping. But there is a condemnation implicit in the sleeping of the five foolish. If they had no oil on hand for their lamps, that was one thing. But the delay gave them ample time to go and purchase more or do whatever they had to do to get some, but they did not. They did not, I think, because they had a plan.

Then the cry that came; “Ἴδου ὁ νυμφίος, ἐξέρχεσθε εἰς ἀπάντησιν – behold, the bridegroom. Go out (for) the meeting.” The teller of the story does not tell us why the bridegroom was delayed, because that’s not important. What is somewhat important is that – no matter the reason for or the length of the delay – they knew that at some point the groom would make his appearance.

7. And then, according to Hoyle “τότε ἠγέρθησαν πᾶσαι αἱ παρθένοι ἐκεῖναι καὶ ἐκόσμησαν τὰς λαμπάδας αὐτῶν – then arose all those virgins and got ready their lamps.” To note the obvious; most people don’t sleep standing up, and so it is that the ladies rose up. It means they got ready. The word ἐκόσμησαν occurs ten times in the NT to refer to getting something ready or in order.

If you say that the ladies “trimmed” their lamps – like KJV and LBT say – then your hearer will envision a weed whacker. Part of the preparation of the lamp would have included cutting the wick to the correct length; they would have “trimmed” that wick. But as we are about to see, those preparations also included making sure that your lamp had oil, and adding some more if needed.

8. Now is revealed why they neglected to bring oil for home or stop for some. They had another plan, “αἱ δὲ μωραὶ ταῖς φρονίμοις εἶπαν Δότε ἡμῖν ἐκ τοῦ ἐλαίου ὑμῶν – the foolish said to the wise ‘give us from your oil.’” Hearing them say that you have to wonder if they had oil at home, but just did not bring it. Their request to cob oil from the others seems almost too matter of fact.

You know people like this. You may be a person like this. But at least they have a solid reason why the five wise should give to them from theirs; “ὅτι αἱ λαμπάδες ἡμῶν σβέννυνται – because our lamps are going out.” The verb σβέννυνται occurs eight times in the NT, always in connection with fire, when a fire that is going out (passive voice) or when a fire is being put out (active voice).

Here the passive voice is used; the wick is smoldering, nobody is actively seeking to put out the fire, but without fuel it will just go out. These are the Christians who don’t actively extinguish their faith, but they just let it go out. They don’t one day stop believing and boldly proclaim their newly acquired Atheism. They just neglect the flame and eventually, through neglect, it goes out.

So exactly what is the oil? Clearly, it’s something in the Christian life that has to be replenished and attended to. Implicit in the shrewd women bringing “containers” of spare oil is that they will be replenishing their lamps when needed. Helmut Thielicke has a chapter on this parable in his very good *The Waiting Father*. He wrongly makes prayer to be the main thing that replenishes.

He correctly points out that,

The oil obviously points to the fact that there is something in our Christian life that is constantly being used up and therefore needs to be replenished. And it is not difficult to discover what it is that needs to be renewed.

Then he spends over a page talking about how that “something” is prayer, which is perhaps a minor part of it, and then he correctly says, “The same is true of the Bible,” but then circles right back to prayer, saying of the Bible, “Its purpose is to be a light to our path, but it can grow dim. This always happens whenever I read it without praying,” and then he starts talking like a Pietist.

There’s actually a commandment that tells us to hear the Word of God regularly, and to do it gladly. That same commandment warns against hating that Word of God, and what does that look like? You just passively skip church once, then again, and it keeps getting easier, and you fill your Sunday mornings in with what? You don’t condemn Christianity, but neither do you embrace it.

As time goes on, you find yourself thinking, talking, and acting less and less like a Christian. Is this parable about procrastination, or not planning ahead, or having a plan that isn’t a very good plan. As a matter of fact, it should be an astounding thing how even the Natural Man knows that there will be a time of reckoning, or at least of death, yet he spends little time thinking about it.

So what exactly is the oil? Start with Psalm 119: 105, “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path,” then move to Proverbs 6:23, “For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life,” and then to Psalm 19: 8, “the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.”

Having said all that, I would not spend much time on the exact meaning of the oil. It begins with the Word, and it continues with living that Word every day, including things like daily contrition and repentance, acts of mercy, and thinking, talking, and acting like a Christian. The point of the story is about preparedness and being ready for the coming of the Bridegroom, who is Jesus.

9. The wisdom of the five is proven by their answer; “ἀπεκρίθησαν δὲ αἱ φρόνιμοι λέγουσαι Μὴ ποτε οὐ μὴ - the wise answered, saying ‘never, no, no.’” That’s the first time I’ve ever seen three negative adverbs in a row like that. Did the five wise see this coming? Had they already decided that when the foolish asked them to share, “never, no way, not going to happen, no, no, and no.”

They likewise have a reason why they won’t share, and it does not take a strong imagination to know what that reason is; if we share with you, then we might not have enough for ourselves. The wise then tell the foolish to do what they should have done a long time ago; “πορεύεσθε μᾶλλον πρὸς τοὺς πωλοῦντας καὶ ἀγοράσατε ἑαυταῖς – go rather to the seller and buy for yourselves.”

10. The foolish do what the wise tell them, “ἀπερχομένων δὲ αὐτῶν ἀγοράσαι – they went away to buy,” and while they were gone their poor planning caught up with them. While they were gone, the groom showed up, “καὶ αἱ ἑτοιμοὶ εἰσῆλθον μετ’ αὐτοῦ εἰς τοὺς γάμους – and those ready entered in with him into the wedding feasts.” The door was at that time both shut and locked,

The word used of those who are ready to enter the feasts, ἑτοιμοὶ (ready), occurs twice in the Marriage Feast (22:4,8), where it is used to refer to the readiness of the food. It also is used just before this (24:44) when Jesus exhorts His followers to “be ready” for the end. His use of the word here must certainly tie into that and those uses, and in fact that’s the point of the story.

The wedding is ready, but they are not. The noun for the wedding feasts is in the plural number, but at other times we find it in the singular to refer to the same thing. When I talk about my daughter’s “wedding,” I’m actually talking about several events: the rehearsal, rehearsal dinner, brunch the day of the wedding, the ceremony at Historic Trinity in Milwaukee, and the reception.

11. Cue the foolish; they’re back; “ὕστερον δὲ ἔρχονται καὶ αἱ λοιπαὶ παρθένοι λέγουσαι Κύριε κύριε, ἄνοιξον ἡμῖν – after that, also come the other virgins, saying ‘Lord, Lord, open to us.’” Go ahead and use words to make the hearer feel the feeling that these five are feeling right now. It’s the feeling I felt when we got lost and were late for my daughter’s reception – and I paid for it!

12. The five foolish were apparently talking – whether through a messenger or servant or directly – to the one who is in charge of the door, whom they call “Lord,” and they seem to think that He can and will do something for them. But instead the Lord answers them, “Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐκ οἶδα ὑμᾶς – truly, I say to you, ‘I have not known you.’” The second verb is in the perfect tense.

We find a similar phrase – “I never knew you” – on the lips of Jesus earlier (7:23), where it is said of false prophets and others who also cry out “Lord, Lord.” The phrase comes down to us today, one that is seldom actually used in real life because of what it means. To say to somebody some variant of “I don’t know you” is to express utter, total anger and contempt; a relationship broken.

When He said those similar words earlier, He ended with “ἀποχωρεῖτε ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν – depart from me, the working lawlessness.” Those are harsh and condemnatory words, spoken to those who claim to be preaching the Word, but are not. This parable does not end with words like that, but the one after this, The Parable of the Talents, ends with harsh words.

The Parable of the Talents ends with talk of things like outer darkness and the weeping and gnashing of teeth, which sounds like Hell. I’m not quite sure what to make of that. It could be that more is expected of preachers and people to whom much has been given, and who preach the word wrongly and use things poorly, and neither seems to be the case with these five.

These women are merely foolish, and they harmed only themselves, and they are only barred from the wedding feast, but are not cast into hell. But isn’t that what it means to be barred from the feast? At any rate, to not be known by Jesus is not a good thing, but it’s a very bad thing, and the whole point of the whole thing is readiness, so that you are known, not unknown, to the Lord.

13. Which is how Jesus ends the parable. He tells His hearers, “Τρηγορεῖτε οὖν – stay awake therefore” because you don’t know when the Son of Man comes. The verb is in the present imperative form – emphasis on the person – and the instruction is to make readiness a part and parcel of your very being, so much so that you can’t separate that watchfulness from your person.

The verb itself means “to stay awake,” and GWTN says that, but the LBT translations all follow KJV and go with “watch.” It’s another case where the word “watch” was probably the best English word to use in 1611, but not so much in this the new Millennium. Several NT writers use the word, twenty-three times in all, to encourage Christians to keep your powder dry and head on a swivel.

Sermon Titles

You Didn’t See That Coming?

Little Help?

The Result of Poor Planning

Hymns

The Bridegroom Soon Will Call Us – LSB 514

Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying – LSB 516

Anything from the *End Times* section

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