

Snoozers but Not Losers
Matthew 25: 1 – 13
(preached on November 5, 2023)

We're in the month of November now. In November, we put up the storm windows and zip warm linings into our coats. We prepare for colder days to come. In many ways, November is a month of preparation.

For me on a personal level, too, November is a month of preparation. I'm getting ready for Thanksgiving. I'm getting ready to celebrate Christmas. I'm getting ready for winter, putting up those orange sticks along the driveway, in case we have a snowstorm; topping up the windshield washer fluid in the car. It's a time to get ready. I tend to be a plan-ahead sort of person, so I enjoy the preparation this season brings. Generally I think it's a good thing to be prepared.

But at first glance the parable Jesus tells in our gospel passage for today, from Matthew, seems to take the business of preparation too far. In the parable, Jesus seems to be saying that if you don't plan ahead – as he puts it, if you don't bring enough oil for your lamp - you're going to lose out. He seems to be saying that the bridesmaids who didn't think to bring extra oil are out of luck, pure and simple. The other bridesmaids, the ones who planned ahead - the ones we might call sensible - they get to go on in and celebrate at the wedding feast. They have no obligation to share their oil with the other bridesmaids, the ones we might call silly. It seems very harsh. It doesn't look like the Jesus we know and love. And in my opinion those sensible bridesmaids are just plain annoying. "We can't help you," they say.

In some ways I have a problem with this parable. The mother in me - who for years told children to share – the mother in me looks at those sensible bridesmaids and says, "Wait a minute! Why can't you share your oil?" The parent in me, the one who wants to give everyone a fair shot, wants to intervene. This is just the way I think after years of planning family activities. On camping trips, I hounded everyone to bring enough bug spray, including some to share just in case. On summer trips to the beach, we couldn't leave the house till we had plenty of sunblock to go around. And if somebody happened to forget, you didn't say, "Too bad. We can't help you." You shared what you had.

At first glance this parable of sensible and silly bridesmaids doesn't seem to go with Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God, where all are included. This parable seems to be about insiders and outsiders, winners and losers. But let's take

a closer look at the parable. Ten young women take oil lamps and go out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them are sensible and five are silly. The sensible ones think ahead: they bring extra oil to keep their lamps burning. Then the unexpected happens: the bridegroom is delayed. The evening drags on, and all the bridesmaids fall asleep.

In the middle of the night, somebody yells, “He’s here! The bridegroom is here! Are you ready? Go out and greet him!”

Now those sensible bridesmaids, they are ready. They had the foresight to bring along some extra oil. They’re not in the dark. The other bridesmaids are at a loss. They didn’t think ahead. They have to run out and buy some oil, but while they’re gone the bridegroom comes. He opens the door to a room where a splendid wedding feast is going on: the aromas of delicious food and the sounds of a lively dance band fill the air. The sensible bridesmaids, ready to go, follow the bridegroom into the wedding feast. Then the door closes. When the silly bridesmaids come, the bridegroom pokes his head out and says, “Do I know you? I don’t think so.” He shuts the door and they’re left out in the cold.

So what are we to make of this? What is Jesus saying here? Let’s go a little deeper. First, let’s consider *when* Jesus is telling this parable, late in the gospel of Matthew. Jesus is nearing the end of his earthly ministry. He’s in Jerusalem, gathered with the disciples on the Mount of Olives.

Just before he tells this parable, Jesus has been in the temple. The religious authorities have been badgering him, finding fault with his teachings, hoping to discredit him. To put it crudely, they want to get rid of him. Now Jesus and his disciples have left the temple, but he knows that it’s only a matter of time before the authorities confront him again. It’s only a matter of time before they accuse him and put him on trial and finally bring to bear the worst of what the Roman Empire can do. It’s only a matter of time before they put him to death. Jesus is feeling great urgency now. He doesn’t have much more time to get his message out.

Also, as he tells this parable, let’s consider *who* Jesus is talking to. He’s talking to his disciples: his best friends, the people who have already decided to follow him. He’s not talking to unbelievers, or people who know nothing about him. He’s talking to believers: his disciples, whose lives have been transformed by the good news of God’s Kingdom. Jesus fully expects that, after his death, his disciples will be persecuted. They will go through great tribulation.

He knows they will have to wait, and wait faithfully, until God's promises are fulfilled. They will have to wait faithfully until the Kingdom he proclaimed comes to earth. He tells this parable to help them wait faithfully. He uses the metaphor of oil for lamps: oil that will keep the lamp of faith burning. Because waiting faithfully is not waiting passively, but waiting in readiness, keeping your lamp burning, even when it takes a long time for God's promises to be fulfilled.

You and I may not know much about oil lamps or bridesmaids in Jesus' time, but we know about waiting. We wait for a call from the doctor with the results of medical tests. We wait for an email of admission from the college we most want to go to. We wait for a message from our son, serving overseas in the military. We wait and we hope and we pray that he will be OK.

When Jesus told this parable, he was waiting too. He was waiting for the ordeal that he knew was coming. He knew that his followers would also have to wait. He told the parable to help them live faithfully as they waited, to wait in faith. Because waiting in faith is about staying ready to respond to Jesus even when he's late. Waiting in faith is about staying ready to follow him, even when God's promises aren't fulfilled as soon as you had hoped.

The bridesmaids, those sensible bridesmaids who made it to the wedding feast, didn't wait for midnight to come, before they filled up on their fuel. They filled up long before the sun dropped out of sight and darkness moved in. It got dark, but they did all right in the darkness, largely because of what they did before the sun went down.

In a similar way, what you and I do today can help us prepare for darker times that may come. We can wait in readiness for Jesus, even when his help doesn't come as soon as we'd hoped. As we wait, we can practice the loving ways he taught. Every time we feed the hungry and give clothes to the naked, we're staying ready to respond. Every time we reach out in love to a stranger in need, we're staying ready to respond. We're ready to respond to the One who calls us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger.

In his book *Let Innocent Blood Be Shed*, Philip Hallie tells the story of a pastor who served in a village in the French Alps during World War II. Over and over again, in his sermons the pastor would tell the villagers in his congregation, "One day Jesus will come into your life and ask you to do something just for him." Over and over again in his visits in their homes, he would say, "One day Jesus will come into your life and ask you to do something just for him."

During the darkest days of the war, the Nazis arrived in the village. They were looking for Jews. The villagers were prepared. They had heard their pastor's message. Even though it meant risking their own lives, they hid their Jewish neighbors from the Nazi soldiers. The soldiers never found them. The villagers gave shelter to more than five thousand Jews, saving them from the death camps.

Some time later, a historian came to the village. He wanted to write a history of what had happened there, to chronicle their courage. He hoped to find some moment of dramatic decision making, when the village came together and decided to help in this way.

He was surprised, though, to hear the villagers describe their actions this way. They said, "It happened quite simply. The Bible says to feed the hungry, to visit the sick, to welcome the stranger. For Christians, it's the normal thing to do." One woman in the village was very matter of fact in explaining their decision. She said, "I don't know. We were [just] used to it."

My friends, one day Jesus will come into your life, or my life, and ask us to do something just for him. The life of faith is about staying ready to respond. In the life of faith we wait, but we don't wait passively. We wait in readiness. God's promises may not be fulfilled as quickly as we would hope, but faith means staying ready to respond to Jesus even when he's late.

Waiting in faith is staying ready to respond to Jesus, trusting in God's promises when that's hard to do. Because it's easy to trust God's promises when peace looks like a real possibility. It's easy to trust God's promises when the economy is booming, when our relationships are going well. It's easy to believe that God's Kingdom has come when we see a hungry child get a full meal, or a sick family member get well. It's easy to trust that Jesus will show up when the sun is shining and life is good.

But when it's midnight, and he isn't here yet, and you see hungry children continue to suffer, or when it's midnight, and he isn't here yet, and the doctors tell you there's nothing more they can do, that's another story. That's when, in faith, we draw on the fuel that we hoped we'd never need. That's when we draw on the fuel that keeps our faith alive, the fuel that powers us to live into God's promises long before they are fulfilled.

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