

Sermon: When You're Low on Oil

11/8/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When I think of the beginning of a wedding, like those we see on television and in the movies, not to mention the day I married my wife, Mallory, I envision a groom and pastor standing at the front of a church. While some guests are finding seats, others are talking with the people seated around them, waiting for the ceremony to begin. It is in that moment that the opening line of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" starts to play. You know the tune...(play song)...Mendelssohn's "Wedding March," the universal sign that it is time to stop talking, stand up, and look towards the back of the sanctuary. The arrival of the bride is at hand.

Back in Jesus' day, weddings did not begin with the arrival of the bride. Instead, after agreeing to be married, the bridegroom would go to his father's house and prepare a place for them, leaving her to wait and prepare for his return. There was no telling exactly how long he would be; if asked, the frequent response was, "Only my father knows." So the bride would be left waiting with her bridesmaids by her side and her things packed and ready to go. She would be left waiting until she heard shouts and the sounds of trumpets in the distance, announcing the return of the bridegroom. It was then, with the bridegroom's arrival, that the wedding would begin and they would depart for their new home.

As the wedding party journeyed, the bridesmaids were responsible for lighting the way. Without their lamps, everyone's safety was at risk and they could be arrested by Roman authorities for traveling at night. So they went, until they finally arrived and the festivities commenced; festivities which would continue for seven days and nights, the bride and bridegroom's honeymoon, and culminate in the wedding banquet.

“Let’s imagine,” Jesus says to the disciples in today’s Gospel lesson, “that a man and a woman are about to get married. While he is at his father’s house preparing a place for them, she and her ten bridesmaids are dressed and ready, awaiting his return. Amidst their waiting, the bridesmaids become tired and fall asleep. Perhaps, the bridegroom was delayed because the preparations had taken longer than he expected, or he may have arrived late in an attempt to build suspense and anticipation. Whatever the answer, sometime around midnight someone begins to shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out and meet him.’ In that moment, five of the bridesmaids realize that they have a serious problem, for while they brought their lamps, they did not bring any oil.”

“We all know,” Jesus goes on to say, “that the safety and well-being of the wedding party would be put at risk without the bridesmaids lighting the way. For that reason, in the midst of their panic, the five “foolish” bridesmaids ask the others to share their oil. But the “wise” bridesmaids refuse. If they were to share, then none of them would have enough oil to complete the journey. So they tell the “foolish” bridesmaids to go and buy some at the dealers. Left with no other choice, the “foolish” bridesmaids do just that and are left behind. When they finally arrive at the wedding banquet, the doors are shut and locked. Doors which the bridegroom refuses to open, since he does not know who they are. ‘Next time,’ he tells them, ‘be awake and prepared, for you never know the day or the hour when the bridegroom will arrive.’ This,” Jesus concludes, “is what the kingdom of heaven will be like.”

I must admit, I’m not a very big fan of this parable. I struggle to see how the kingdom of heaven is like a place with a closed and locked door, which refuses to open because those outside arrived a little too late. I also struggle to see how the kingdom of heaven is like a place that welcomes those who refuse to share with others, instead keeping everything they have for

themselves. Like Lauren Winner, one of my professors at Duke Divinity School, I wish that I could rewrite the parable. I wish that the parable had spoken of how the “wise” bridesmaids shared their oil with the “foolish,” even if it meant that none of them would have enough. True, their lamps would have gone out along the way, but they would have shared that burden together. And when they arrived at the bridegroom’s house, no one would have been turned away. For in the kingdom of heaven there is always more than enough and what you share with your neighbor is multiplied.

Now that is a parable that I can get behind! One which reveals how gracious is our God and calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Except here’s the problem: that’s not the parable that we’ve been given. Most likely, because it’s not the message that we need to hear. When was the last time you found yourself running low on oil? When you found yourself praying and praying, and it felt like your prayers were not being answered? Perhaps you were hoping for a partner to share your life with, or to have a child, or to find a new job, or for a loved one to be healed. For years, Mallory and I struggled to have kids and worried it might never happen. Now, we are blessed to have two healthy boys. Trying to care for and teach them during the present pandemic, though, I must admit sometimes make me feel like my lamp is so low it might be running on empty. What am I to do when I feel this way, when it feels like a victory just to make it from one day to the next?

One thing we hear is that we shouldn’t be running off to the store at midnight to try and buy what we lack. No matter how hard we try, we can’t buy hope, or peace, or faith. We can’t buy what we need to enter the kingdom of heaven, no matter how much money we have or how quickly we rush to the store. We can’t buy the oil we need, nor can we borrow it from someone else. The best explanation that I can think of for why the “wise” bridesmaids refused to share is

that they couldn't, even if they wanted to. Their oil was the result of years of faithful living. It is something that a person can only gain through committing their life to God and seeking to live in accordance with God's will. It is a gift that God desires to give to each of us, and a gift that we all must seek and receive for ourselves.

So what should those "foolish" bridesmaids have done? In that moment, they could have hoped and prayed for a miracle. They could have reached out to God, asking that their lamps remain lit throughout the night. After all, God had already performed such a miracle during the festival of Hanukkah, when the menorah in the Temple remained lit for eight days and nights despite only having a single days' worth of oil. Why couldn't God perform that same miracle again? I imagine we can all think of a time in our lives when something miraculous happened; a time when the doubts and fears that consumed us disappear, even if only for a moment, to be replaced by hope, and peace, and faith. The truth is that miracles can and do happen. We need look no further than Jesus to know that. Not always, though, when or how we expect.

What if, rather than rushing to the market, the five "foolish" bridesmaids had stayed? What if, rather than seeking to catch up, they had gone with the bridegroom and other bridesmaids that night? Yes, at some point their lamps would have gone out. But they would have been known by the bridegroom and, thanks to the other bridesmaids, their way would have still been lit. If they had gone with the others, they would have arrived at the wedding banquet before the doors were closed and locked. What if the mistake that the "foolish" bridesmaids made that night was not their lack of oil, but their unwillingness to depend on others and on God? What if the miracle they so desperately needed was standing there right beside them the entire time?

Given all that we have experienced this year, I imagine that many of us are running a little low on oil. There are probably more than a few of us who are struggling to find hope, and peace, and faith. I say this because I have experienced these same doubts. Amidst all the isolation and sickness, not to mention divisiveness of the past week, I have found myself wondered just how much more of this I can really take. I'm tired and tired of it all. I wish that we were not so divided over our differences and that this pandemic had never begun. I wish that we could all gather together for worship on Sunday morning and that my kids could still go to childcare during the week. Like I said, I'm tired and would love nothing more than a miracle, than to find my lamp suddenly filled. But what if that is not the miracle I have been given? What if the answer to my prayers in this moment is not more oil, but the people whose lamps are burning brightly all around me?

When our oil is running low, when we feel like we can't go on, sometimes the best thing we can do is lean on those around us. For when we do, we allow their hope, and peace, and faith to inspire and encourage us. We see the emphasis they place on things like prayer and reading Scripture, as well as worship and fellowship, those faithful practices that let their lamps shine so brightly, and feel called to do the same. We allow for them to show us the way, so that we all might come to know the bridegroom and so that, when we do arrive at the heavenly banquet, we might all be welcomed in. Praise be to God for all those who have helped guide us along the way. May God give us the strength and courage to shine as brightly for others as they have for us. Amen.