

Showing up with your lamps
Matthew 25:1-13

Anne-Marie Jeffery
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I'm going to do the sermon a little differently today with the first part in the style of a bible study. We are almost at the end our annual pledge campaign and next week, November 15, is our ingathering of pledges. It is a time when we ask you to pray and ponder what you will commit to give St. Peter's in the next year. At this time we also talk about why it is important to give of your time, your talent and your treasure. The last one is often the hardest one to talk about.

In our gospel we have the story of a wedding, a bridegroom who is very late and 10 bridesmaids whose job it is the light the way for the bridegroom when he arrives. Let's hear the gospel read again this time by a male voice. While you are listening, I want you to think about the following question – what part of the story do you dislike the most?

Gospel is read again

Now unlike a bible study, most of you are not going to be able to share, but remember what you had in your mind. I am going to ask for one or two responses from the people here in church.

Hear a few responses.

I find that there are many things not to like – the lateness of the bridegroom, the running out of oil and the bridesmaids who get shut out of the celebration. However, I had to name what bothers me the most about this story, it is what the bridesmaids who had extra oil said to the ones who didn't when they asked them to share. They said, "No – there will not be enough for you and us."

As we say, this doesn't seem very Christian – not sharing. And to top it all, these non-sharing bridesmaids are the ones who end up at the party. It reminds me of those of us who stockpiled during the pandemic and kept on going when we knew there was much need. "I'm going to buy as much toilet paper as I can even though I have plenty, because I want to be prepared." I don't like myself when I think this way and yet this seems to be the way of the wise ones in our story who make it into the wedding celebration.

Here is the second question I want you to think about. What would you like to change about this parable?

Again hear a few responses.

For me, I would like the wise maidens to share their oil. Wouldn't that have been wonderful? Then all the maidens would have gotten into the party. There wouldn't be any running around in the middle of the night trying to buy oil. The groom wouldn't have to say that terrible sentence at the end - 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Of course, if

that happened, there wouldn't be a much of a story - at least not one that challenges us and makes us think. It would just be a nice story about bridesmaids sharing oil and a wonderful wedding party. This is where I think we need to be careful about these parables of the kingdom of God. We need to remember that it is a story meant to teach us about the kingdom of God. Sometimes we get too caught up in the logistics of a story that didn't actually happen, and lose sight of what Jesus might be trying to teach us.

I do recommend taking a look at what you didn't like about the story and then what you would like to change and see how it shed light on the kingdom of God. That is what I did and here is where it went. The main theme of the parable is about being prepared for the kingdom of God, being prepared for the bridegroom's arrival – the return of Jesus Christ. As I pondered the lack of sharing of the oil, I began to wonder if the oil we need to be prepared for the coming of the bridegroom is something that cannot be shared.

When I think about being prepared for the coming of Christ I think about the state of my heart. Is it open and aware – looking for the kingdom of God that is already here and is yet to come? The state of one's heart is not something that can be shared. Nor is it something that can be collected or stored up. You can have said all the prayers in the world and helped thousands of people in need and still find yourself not ready. I believe prayer, helping the poor and fighting for justice does help prepare your heart, but those are not actions that can be stored up like oil. They are ongoing.

This preparedness also requires trust – trust in the bridegroom because I believe God's hand is at work in the preparation of our hearts. If we can turn our hearts towards God and not get distracted, amazing things can happen. Debie Thomas¹ wonders what would have happened if the bridesmaids who were running out of oil had stuck around. Perhaps they would have been welcomed by the groom who would have been glad to have them even with their dimmer almost gone lights. I like this scenario because how often are we aware that our hearts are not ready – perhaps numbed and beaten down by fears, trials and tribulations.

I think back to when the pandemic started, and we closed our church doors. It was very scary for me. Having worship in church is a huge part of what I do. How was it going to happen if we could not gather physically in a place and what were the ramifications? How were we going to connect with one another? Take care of one another? Pray together? Be nourished by communion? How were people going to give money to keep our ministries going when they weren't coming to church?

It would have been easy for all of us to shut down spiritually and wallow in despair, but we didn't. Instead, we showed up and tried. It wasn't always pretty. We muddled through it especially in those first few weeks as we figured out how to do online worship, how to do pantry and pastoral care and all the other things we do as the St. Peter's community. We were present and our ministries actually thrived. More people got

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2806-the-story-of-the-bridesmaids>

involved. We made connections we never imagined and re-connected with those that we thought were out of reach.

We opened our hearts to the bridegroom and the bridegroom showed us the way. I hope you have seen the videos we used for our pledge campaign which highlighted how our ministries have gone these past months.

The pandemic is by no means over. Our election has shown us just how deeply divided our country is. We continue to be in a place where it is easy to let our fear take over and go off and search for oil or just plain hide. The temptation is there to keep to ourselves and store up as much oil as we can.

Jesus, our bridegroom calls us instead to show up with our lamps lit as best as we can and be ready to go forth together, because our bridegroom knows how to have a party. Our bridegroom knows how to thrive in the midst of desperation and despair. Let us show up with whatever we have – our time, our talent and yes, our treasure – whether we think they are bright flames or little flickers. In 2021 let us faithfully give to the St. Peter's community and to the world and see what kind of celebration God will create.