

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
Stewardship Sunday, November 6, 2011

Joshua 24:1–3, 14–25
Matthew 25:1–13

CLEAREST MESSAGE — HARDEST PARABLE

When we consider teachings like this one in scripture, I don't know about you but I kind of naturally want to gravitate toward the simple message. And clearly, one of the messages in this story is that being in the presence of Jesus is like being at a wonderful wedding reception. It's a party. It's heaven.

This story from Matthew has lots of other specific symbolism though, so it nudges us along to look deeper. Certainly it is one of the parables that Jesus told and it's also something more, something that many call an allegory. Quite frankly, most of us don't give two hoots about the difference between a parable and an allegory. We just want to know the meaning, right? But theologians stay obsessed about these sorts of things. And so when I read these very capable people that tell me there's more to the story than meets the eye, something kind of wells up within me and I want to look further. I want to know what this passage really means. My sensibilities perk up. If people are offering different interpretations, what is the truth here? How am I to understand this lesson in my life?

Parable or allegory, this is the story of ten bridesmaids and it is very disturbing. Where is all that sharing that we talked about last week that was so important to the community? Where is that compassion, that never-ending forgiveness we love to preach? We do love to preach grace, we Presbyterians, don't we? We don't like preaching much else. In fact, if we try to preach much else, we come back to grace.

So even in this disagreeable story about ten virgins, when we hear the condemnation, we kind of pull up short. It starts out, "Five were wise, and five were foolish." It kind of preconditions us, doesn't it? They all doze off. Okay, we are back in grace. But what difference does it make? Who cares who brought the oil? Let's just share. Isn't it okay for some to fall short and for others to pick up the slack? Isn't it commendable if the wise virgins share their oil? Why are they refusing? And how expensive can this oil be? And why is it better for them to keep their refills for themselves? And then, as if to make the story completely beyond comprehension, the foolish virgins are locked out. Even after they go and buy some oil, they are not admitted to the marriage feast. What happened to that clarity we were seeking?

Let's look at the specifics. Jesus is clearly the bridegroom and we are the bridesmaids, the disciples. We are the servants of this story, the ones in the wedding feast. We are there, waiting for the bridegroom to come. The feast itself is God's kingdom—God's empire, if you will, on earth. And that long wait until midnight is the time between our salvation and our redeeming when Christ returns. It's the time between the cross and Christ's second coming—between Advent and Christ's having every knee bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord—that dark time that we all know exists, even sometimes in the church.

That dark time requires vigilance, preparedness. The Quakers call it the "allthereness." You had to be "all there" to be a part of what was happening in those quiet Quaker services. The story is told that Einstein was "all there" and that's why he was considered a genius. And one night, he was at a gathering at Princeton in someone's home, probably of a graduate student or a professor, and the conversation went on into the night. And then when midnight occurred, Einstein stood up and said, "This has been very fulfilling, but now it is time for all of you to go home because I have to teach a class tomorrow." Then one of the members of the crowd tugged at Einstein and said, "Dr. Einstein, this is my house." He was "all there," completely engrossed.

So why is it that oil is our focus? And why is that focus so important? Why is it such a key role and why is it so personal? It is most assuredly the spirit that we are given, that faith, the calling that we feel within that has come from outside of us that helps us make choices we would not make on our own. This very disagreeable story where the five wise turn down the five foolish has to be more about harshness, it has to be about more than just a limit of love. There is something else going on here besides stinginess. What can it be? What's the reality? The truth is, as much as we would like to, we cannot give one another the spiritual oil necessary to be disciples. That only comes from Jesus. Only the bridegroom can bless our service in such a way that we have a reservoir for those dark times. Only Jesus can give us the oil which can become light and warmth and righteousness.

I think the reason we are clueless about this passage, this parable/allegory, is that the church has never taught us just how important it is to make that commitment, to do the hard work of being spiritually disciplined. It's kind of like the student who loans us his homework. Yes, we get by the assignment, but he can't loan us the hours he spent studying, can he? It's like the neighbor who lets us borrow his lawn mower, but he can't give us the foresight and the maintenance schedule that went into keeping up that machine.

How can we as disciples learn the lesson of being spiritually disciplined? How can we do so and not think that somehow we are producing the oil ourselves? At best we are reservoirs that God fills, cups that are open to being filled. But even that openness is the Holy Spirit. That's why this sounds so strange to us, doesn't it, this passage? That's why it doesn't seem to fit, on a Stewardship Sunday. Why it doesn't make any sense—Stewardship Sunday. Isn't every Sunday Stewardship Sunday? Isn't every day Stewardship Sunday? Faith has to become more than this world's greatest giveaway. Faith has to be more than a free ride, and yet free it is!

So how do we teach our children that when they hit adolescence there will be some darkness, and when they are participating in a faith community, even then there will be some times that try them and their faith? How do we teach our children that it's more than just showing up—that when disappointment comes, when personal failures happen, when there are job losses and health crises, when there are betrayals, when the loss is so real it is almost tangible, the darkness and the shadows almost palpable, how do we prepare them? How do we prepare ourselves for these times? Or have we taught our children we are constantly practicing that faith day after day, year after year.

Jesus told his listeners to make the commitment necessary to deepen their stores of oil. You still don't get it? It still doesn't make sense? What is it that is going to last when we come face to face with our Savior? What will be the oil of our faith, the stuff of our spiritual grounding, the faithfulness of our daily lives, the evidence that we have accepted the invitation? It will be the arduous work of not just hearing and knowing and studying, it will be the arduous work of living—practicing exactly what Jesus taught us. If we need a reminder, all we need to do is look at the sixth chapter of Luke. Here are some of the things we hold dear and which we are really pretty good about practicing. But then it gets harder as the list goes on, and you will see what I mean.

Judge not, and you will not be judged. That sounds very Presbyterian, doesn't it?

Condemn not and you will not be condemned. Remember that grace thing?

Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over and placed in your lap. Look it up. That's what it really says—*placed in your lap.*

For the measure you use will be the measure that comes back to you. Now it makes sense.

Amen.