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All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of Jesus, the oil of gladness. Amen.

What an awful parable! Is this really what the kingdom of God is like? I mean, didn't we just hear a few weeks ago about the wedding guest who got thrown out of the wedding because he didn't wear the right clothes to the ceremony? It was hard enough to deal with the judgment in that one - but this Gospel reading is really tough! Let's look at the story for a few minutes and see if there is some redeeming feature we can find in it for us.

Back in Jesus' day, it was the custom for the bridesmaids to go out and greet the bridegroom when he comes to get the bride, and they would light the way with their lamps. Apparently, grooms must have had a habit of being late, because in this story, half of the bridesmaids brought extra oil for the lamps in case they had to wait for a while. They are called wise. They must have been good Girl Scouts because they were prepared.

The other half of the bridesmaids brought their lamps, too, but no extra oil. They are called foolish. They were not prepared.

Other than that one distinction, everything else is the same concerning the wise bridesmaids and the foolish bridesmaids. They all arrived on time, they all brought their lamps, they all waited for the groom and they all got tired and fell asleep (which doesn't sound like a very bridesmaid-like thing to do). So is it really true that the only difference between them - for which there might be a lot of underlying reasons to explain the five's lack of extra oil - is reason to exclude them from the wedding banquet?

Will the Kingdom of God really be like this?

Of course, back in the day, the people were expecting Jesus to return at any moment, so the most important thing to do was to keep alert, to be watchful. But by the time Matthew's audience was hearing his Gospel account, it had been more than 50 years since Jesus had left the earth. It was getting harder and harder to

feel a sense of immediacy about his return, and it was getting a lot harder to wait as well!

Now that it is close to 2000 years later, the expectation, the waiting, the urgency - all of those things are considerably more diminished in intensity for us. But is that what we are supposed to do anyway? Just wait around? For something that might not happen in our lifetime?

The Wedding Banquet in Jesus' parables is, of course, an image of the realm of God coming into its fullness, where the Table is set, the meal is served, and all of God's creation is gathered together to enjoy the bounty.

The people of Matthew's time, whose lives were spent living under the thumb of an occupying empire, were looking forward to a time of shalom - of peace with justice for the whole community. The overriding idea about the End is not vengeance, but the undoing of vengeance and of all violence. It is the transition from vengeance to hope, from the end of time to its redemption. I think it is definitely worth waiting for.

So here's what I think we can take away from this lesson: I'm thinking this story is not about how much oil you have, but how much oil you carry with you.

Back in the day, I often helped lead the music for a variety of church camps and retreats, playing my guitar and generally acting silly in order to get people to sing. You probably are surprised by that! Anyway, one of the songs I learned in that stage of my life was called, "Give Me Oil in My Lamp." It went like this:

*Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burnin', burnin', burnin',
Give me oil in my lamp I pray, Hallelujah!
Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burnin', burnin', burnin',
Keep me burnin' 'til the break of day!*

There were other verses, too. There was, of course, "Give me gas for my Ford, keep me truckin' for the Lord!" And there was another: "Give me wax for my board, keep me surfen' for the Lord!" I can't remember any others.

It never occurred to me until this week, that that song could be related to this parable! Oil in your lamp produces light, and in the parable, light symbolizes good deeds done in response to God's graciousness. Jesus says elsewhere, "You are the light of the world," and "Let your light so shine before men and women, that they

may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven." If we are the light of the world, our light enables others to see God, and then they also become light to the world, and more people can see God, and then they become light to the world. You get the picture.

And what does it mean to 'see God?' Are we only going to see God when Jesus comes back, whenever that will be? No. We can see God all around us all the time. We see God in the faces of our children, of our neighbors, of the person on the street who offers a random smile as we pass by. And Jesus tells us where we can see God: "I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was in prison, and you visited me. I was sick, and you comforted me.

That's where we find God.

And when our oil is running low, that's where we get filled up, too. And it will run low!

When your child comes into the kitchen at 6:30 and says, "I need some poster board and some glue and some construction paper for a project that's due tomorrow. You need to take me to the store," and you say, "Are you kidding?" and morph into Godzilla, you're oil is running low.

When a 2-year-old doesn't get a nap, she is going to crash because her oil has run low.

When you haven't had a conversation with your spouse in three weeks that hasn't revolved around carpooling logistics, your marriage is running dry because your oil is low.

If you have worked 80-hour weeks for longer than you can remember, your relationships are going to suffer because your oil has run low.

One way or another, there will be a time when our oil will run low. And there is not a quicker way I know of filling it up again than by doing something for someone else.

We don't fill it up because we are scared we are going to get locked out of the kingdom of heaven.

Each time we work for justice, we are witnesses to the presence of Jesus in the here and now. Each time we advocate for the poor, or reach out to the friendless, or work to make the world that God loves a better place, we are witnesses to the presence of the Risen Christ. We are those who give hope when hope is scarce, comfort when it is needed, and courage when we are afraid. That is how - and why we fill our lamps.

We fill them up because we want to meet the bridegroom when he comes. And he will come. Soon.

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, Keep me burning to the break of day!