

“Why the Wise Refused to Share”

“The Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five were foolish and didn’t take enough oil for their lamps, and five were wise enough to take along extra oil.”

Like so many of Jesus’ kingdom parables, the emphasis is not so much on the setting as it is on the characters.

He doesn’t begin by giving an overview of the scene,

zooming in by giving us a detailed description of what it looks and sounds and feels like,

and then introducing characters into one by one,

but rather he starts right in with the characters & their interactions, with just a word or two to set them in context.

“Bridesmaids” tells us that the background is a wedding;

“10” of them tells us it’s a large wedding, a big affair, with lots of people;

“went to meet” fills the scene with an air of anticipation;

and “didn’t take enough” and “extra” introduces some uncertainty into the story.

In just 2 sentences we are dropped into what seems to be the middle of a drama,

involving five foolish bridesmaids and five wise ones.

“When the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy & fell asleep, their lamps burning.

At midnight they were roused by the shout, ‘Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and meet him!’

All the bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps.”

And it was then that *“the five foolish ones asked the others,*

‘Please give us some of your oil because our lamps are going out.’”

And here comes the startling turn of events:

“The wise ones replied, ‘We don’t have enough for all of us. Go to a shop and buy some for yourselves.’”

According to Jesus, the wise ones didn’t share. That seems so strange, doesn’t it?

I mean, isn’t that one of the first things we try to teach our children?

Isn’t sharing one of those major life lessons we are supposed to learn in kindergarten?

Doesn’t scripture exhort us dozens, if not hundreds, of times to share?

But here, those who are described as wise do not share.

And so the question is, “why not?”

And to answer that, we need to look at what the oil and the lamps and the light represents.

So we begin with light, the first word God spoke into the darkness the first thing God created.

Whether it’s in the glittering stars as God spoke a promise to Abraham,

or in a blazing bush as God appeared to Moses,

or as a pillar of fire as God led his children through the wilderness,

throughout scripture, light represents the comforting, guiding, enlightening presence of the living, loving God.

But it’s more than that, as God called Israel to be a light to the nations.

And one of the ways that that plays out is in Jesus who said, *“I am the light of the world”*.

And on top of that, Jesus challenges his disciples – then & now – just as God challenged Israel, saying,

“You are the light of the world – like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden.

No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket.

Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house.”

So if God/Jesus is the light, then God’s chosen people/Jesus’ disciples are to carry lamps

in which the presence of God burns.

In other words, those **lamps** represent faith.

And by faith, I am not talking about intellectual assent to a theoretical concept of God,

but rather a way of living that continually acknowledges that God is God and we are not,

a way of living that understands that we are called to follow God’s will and not our own,

not only in the broad strokes, but in the tiny details of our lives,

a way of living in which we are constantly learning how to give up our power

and let God’s power have sway as Jesus modeled.

When we understand that the lamps in the parable represent faith,
it becomes clear why the wise bridesmaids cannot give the foolish bridesmaids oil.
While we talk about “sharing our faith”, we can’t actually share it in a way that gives it to them.
In other words, while we can witness to our faith by telling others about our faith,
we cannot produce faith in another person, and that’s because we can’t share our **oil**.
We can’t share what fuels our faith because everyone must find their own fuel.
We can share where we find fuel for our own faith but we can’t actually fuel another person’s faith.

That means there is nothing that I or any other preacher can say that can bring anyone to faith.
Martin Luther explained why it wasn’t his job to impart faith once, when he said,
*“I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing.
And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends... [the Spirit did its work]”*.

**I cannot give you what you need to have to fuel your lamp of faith,
but what I can do is talk just a little bit about what I believe fuels faith.**

After we baptize someone, we charge them with these words:

*“Let your light so shine before others
that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”*

**and to do that we need to follow the two great Commandments,
which are to love God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength
and love our neighbors – ALL of our neighbors – as ourselves.**

So how do we love God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength?

Let me give you three ways: Worship, Prayer, and Bible Study.

Worship means more than just coming to church and going through a routine rite or ritual.
The word “worship” comes from the word that means “worthy”
so worship is about acknowledging the worthiness of God.
In essence, worship is praising God for who God is and thanking God for what God does. That’s it.

Prayer means more than reading someone else’s beautifully composed words.
Prayer means conversation with God, a conversation that involves not just talking but listening.

And **Bible Study** means more than just hearing a few lessons read on Sunday
or reading a devotional book at home.

Bible study means allowing God to speak through the text itself,
and through those who are reading and reflecting on the text with you.

Worship, Prayer, and Bible Study can be done alone – and should be.

Worship, Prayer, and Bible Study must also be done with others.

That’s part of the covenant we make when we affirm our baptism: *“to live among God’s faithful people”*.

If we’re not worshipping & praying & studying God’s word by ourselves & with other believers,
then we are not loving God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength,
and we will not have enough fuel to light our lamps to help others see the presence of God.

And how do we love our neighbors as ourselves?

Again, let me offer three ways: Witness, Service, and Social Justice.

Witness here means sharing our faith in *word*, not in deed,
because the dates are covered under Service and Social Justice.

Witness does not simply mean inviting people to church.

It means sharing who God is in your life.

It means telling people in your own words about the amazing God we serve.

Witness is not optional – it is an essential element of fuel for our lamps.

Witness is also not something you have to make yourself do,

but something you will find yourself doing naturally when you have faith.

A fruit tree doesn’t have to force itself to bear fruit: it just does.

We know what **Service** is – it's providing food for the hungry, water for the thirsty, houses for the homeless, and welcome for the stranger.

We Lutherans are good at service.

But Service is only one of the three ways that we love our neighbors, and if that's all we do, it's not enough if your lamp is to burn with God's light.

Witness and Service and the third thing is **Social Justice**

which is also not optional, but rather an essential ingredient in the fuel for our lamps.

Everyone who has made a public profession of faith in our Lutheran Church has promised to work for justice and peace in all the earth.

Obviously, we are not doing a very good job in fueling our lamps through Social Justice.

Today's parable ends on a mixed note.

The wise bridesmaids enter into the kingdom.

The foolish ones have to go and get oil and by the time they get back, they've missed out on the party.

I don't think the bridegroom speaks so much of it out of anger as of sadness, when he says, "*I don't know you*".

But that's why Jesus told the parable –

not so we could pat ourselves on the back for being wise bridesmaids,

but to help us look at the ways that we as individuals, as Salem,

as part of the New England Synod, and as part of White Mainline Protestantism,

as part of the entire Body of Christ, are falling short.

The good news is that, even tho' it was midnight, the foolish bridesmaids were able to find oil. Because the oil that fuels our lamps of faith is always available.

Worship, Prayer and Bible Study – individually and together – help us to love God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength.

Witness, Service and Social Justice – individually and together – help us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Each and every one of those things is an essential ingredient for the oil of faith.

I encourage each of us to check our fuel tanks.

If people can't look at us and see a brilliant light, and want what we have, then we need to add fuel to our faith.

Worship, Prayer and Bible Study. Witness, Service and Social Justice.

We Lutherans talk about Word and Sacrament as a means of Grace or of Justification.

But it is not enough to be justified; we must also be sanctified.

And it is Worship, Prayer and Bible Study, and Witness, Service and Social Justice that are the means of Sanctification, the ingredients that go into the fuel that lights up our faith.

No one can worship for us, or pray the prayers on our hearts for us, or study God's Word for us.

No one can witness for us, or serve for us, or work for social justice for us.

We must each feel our own lamps,

but we can certainly support each other by sharing with each other where we get fuel.

I know what fuels my faith.

And I know others whose lights shine so brightly that it is obvious they have fueled their faith.

If you want to know where to find fuel, just ask and I'll help you find it.

But I can't do it for you and neither can anyone else.

Each of us must fuel our own lamps.

So let's do that. Because the bridegroom has arrived, the party has begun,

and we don't want to miss out on one minute of the joy of the kingdom! Amen!