

The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
November 19, 2017

**"Filling Stations"**  
by Mary Anne Biggs

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 ~ Matthew 25:1-13

This is one of those moments when I am saying, "Thank you, Jesus, thank you that this is not the *only* parable about the Kingdom of Heaven." Thank goodness there are other ways to describe it that do not involve bridesmaids and oil reserves and doors that lock half of us out ... just because we were a little late. Maybe if we can fix our eyes on the sower ... and those mustard seeds ... those other parables about the kingdom of heaven ... we can manage to suffer through one parable that hinges on *not* sharing what you have. I have to acknowledge to you at the outset that I think this is a text that makes church people look bad. Is this really how we define a wise person ... as someone who only takes care of herself? Is this the kind of story we want people to identify with us? "Well, you know, the Christians: they're the ones that hoard all their oil. They preach the wisdom of stockpiling, because they believe that if people are in need, it's their own darn fault."

This is parable is a hard sell, and not just for me. Back in the days when only young men prepared for pastoral ministry, a certain Dr. Eislen, president of Garrett Seminary, preached on this parable in chapel. He wrapped up his sermon by yelling at his seminarians, "Young men, tell me, would you rather be in the light with the wise virgins, or out in the dark with the foolish virgins?" Such laughter arose that chapel was dismissed early that day!

When I'm a little stymied as I'm writing a sermon, I try to imagine what it would be like to read other passages of scripture through the lens of the particular text that I'm working on. For example, what would happen if we placed this text from Matthew 25 next to other portions of Matthew's gospel, and read them together? What would this parable have to say to those passages? I was coming up with rewrites like this:

*(Matthew 6:19ff) Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, although to get there, you will need large oil reserves, so forget the first part of what I said; store up for yourselves oil on earth, so that you will have treasure in heaven. Or (Matthew 6:25ff) Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body what you will wear. Worry about your oil; that's the main thing. Worry about whether you have enough for you, and forget about everyone else; they are not your problem. Or (Matthew 7:7ff) Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you, unless of course you're late and the bridegroom answers, in which case, you might as well forget it. Or (Matthew 7:12ff) In everything do unto others as you would have them do to you. In everything, that is, except oil, which changes all the rules.*

Like I said, I didn't get very far ... it was tough ... a rather deflating experience. This parable challenges most of the things that I believe about God. It flies in the face of pivotal stories. If taking care of yourself were the main message of the gospels, the miracle of the loaves and fishes would never have happened. Jesus wouldn't have lifted a finger for that hungry crowd ... not if they hadn't packed their own picnic supper. Instead of "The Feeding of the Five Thousand," we would have "The Moral of the Very Few Who Came Prepared," and that is not what I want to teach our church about God. I don't want us to emulate a bunch of smarmy bridesmaids and stingy oil men. I want better for our church. I want better for my country. I want better for Jesus, and I get tired of defending him when he tells stories like this. I want to say, "Okay, buddy, you get yourself out of this one."

Of course, the real issue is that I have to get *myself* out of this one ... because this parable also hits a little too close to home. The truth is, I do like to be prepared. I think it's a good idea to show up with a sermon on Sunday morning. I'm in favor of savings accounts ... and life insurance ... and taking care of our physical and mental and spiritual health. I believe in being prepared, and I bet you do, too. We are part of a culture that practically worships planning and forethought and preparation for the unknown that lies ahead. I think it is why we get so angry when something goes horribly wrong ... when the budget is overspent ... or the emergency procedures turn out to be filled with holes ... it looks like we haven't done our homework ... like we're a bunch of fools who don't know what we're doing. Surely, if there had been a better plan we could have been prepared for this. Surely, if we had had some wise leadership, this disaster would never have happened. Oh yes, this parable hits very close to home. I don't much like those smarmy bridesmaids who showed up with their own flasks ... but the truth is that I recognize them ... and if they were running for office, I'd probably vote for them.

So, is that all we have, in the end ... just a story that any Boy Scout and insurance agent could have told us? Is that the message, here? Be prepared ... hang onto your oil ... and remember only a fool gives it away. Well, that's depressing. That sounds like Jesus has been having lunch with corrupt politicians ... like somebody got to him. Is the Kingdom of Heaven just one big oil conglomerate? Is this a text we can look forward to hearing in the next presidential campaign to justify somebody's agenda? Couldn't we reasonably conclude that perhaps Jesus had a moment of temporary insanity ... due to messianic stress ... which accounts for this out-of-character, fluke of a parable ... which certainly does not cohere with the rest of his teaching? Or is the Kingdom of Heaven really no different than the empires of earth ... where we store up oil for our own survival?

Of course, the parable doesn't say whether the bridesmaids had any oil at home. It doesn't tell us if the wise ones were hoarding it or if the foolish ones hadn't had time to get to the store yet. It doesn't tell us what they had in their savings accounts or how generous they were with their worldly goods. For all we know, the wise bridesmaids were down to their very last flask of oil ... and the foolish bridesmaids were sitting on barrels of the stuff... the parable doesn't tell us. Its only concern is what they brought with them when they left the house. It doesn't say a word about motives or extenuating circumstances or reasons why five women might conceivably have left their oil flasks at home. And that's significant, I think. Maybe this is not a story about how much oil you have. Maybe this is a story about the oil you carry with you. And the parable is very clear ... all ten bridesmaids had lamps ... but five of them were foolish and five of them

were wise. The wise ones brought flasks of oil with their lamps when it was time to wait for the bridegroom. The foolish ones showed up with lamps and nothing to keep them going. And when your lamp goes out ...you may have gallons of oil sitting at home ... but it's not going to do you any good there.

So, what does that look like ... the kind of oil you carry with you? What does that look like ... if it's not a commodity that we buy and sell? Maybe it depends on the kind of oil we're talking about. When I was in seminary, we heard a lecture about the spiritual life of the preacher. The speaker brought an oil lamp ... the kind with a wick and real oil in the bottom ... as a visual aid. He talked about how the role of the pastor ... or the role of Christian, for that matter ... is to be a light for others ... "the light of the world." Then he lit the wick and watched the lamp burn. But (and here was the rigged part), because there was only a tiny bit of oil in that lamp, it only burned for a few moments. He asked us ... what happens when the oil runs out? Well, then the light goes out of course ... and you have nothing to give. And a pastor with no oil ... a Christian with no oil ... can't be the light of the world for anybody ... no matter how much they want to. So, then he asked, "What fills you up spiritually when you run dry? What replenishes your oil? Where do you find God, and how can you make sure that you get enough of that oil for your lamp, so that God can fill you up again? Because you will run dry. And when you do, you can't be a light for anybody." I instantly remembered the safety speech we hear on airplanes. "In the event of an emergency, oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling; please be sure to secure your own oxygen mask first before assisting others."

I'm now a pastor in a church ... and I am a mother and a grandmother ... and a spouse, and a friend. I am a Christian, and I know what it means to run out of oil, and I'm guessing you do, too. Your kids walk into the kitchen at 5:30 and ask, "What's for dinner?" and you say, "Meatloaf," and they say, "What, *again!*?" ... and suddenly you have morphed into Godzilla, right there in the kitchen. Let me guess what may have caused that meltdown ... you're out of oil. It's fairly simple. When the arrow on the gas tank points to empty, you are going to run out of gas. If a two-year-old doesn't get a nap, she is going to crash. If you have worked eighty-hour weeks for longer than you care to know, your relationships are going to suffer. It's not really something any of us can avoid. There are some kinds of fuel that just are not negotiable ... if you eat junk food for twenty years, your body is going to let you know about it.

There are also some kinds of oil you can't borrow from anyone else. Teenagers learn this, at a certain point ... you can borrow someone's homework and get by on the assignment ... but you can't borrow the hours they put in studying for the test. There are some kinds of preparation we can only do for ourselves. There are some reserves that no one else can build up for us. You can't borrow someone else's peace of mind or their passion for God. You can't say to your friend, "You have such a happy marriage, don't you? Could you give me some of that?" It doesn't work. You have to find it yourself. You have to figure out what fills you up, spiritually ... and then make sure you have some to carry with you, every single minute of the day ... because that's how often you'll need it.

And here's the thing ... you will run out. Time will run out. The hour gets late ... everyone gets sleepy. We all doze, we all put it off, saying, "One of these days, I'm going to quit working so hard and I'll put in that quality time with my kids." "One of these days, I'm going to take up

painting again ... I've always wanted to do it." "One of these days, I'm going to really get involved down at the shelter." We all doze. We all put it off. And then the shout goes up: "He's coming!" It's time. And one of these days is today ... and it's over ... and you never did bring your flask of oil.

I think that's one of the hardest things about this parable. The time will come when you have to draw on the oil you have, right there ... in your body ... in your flask. And it isn't going to come from your pension savings ... and it isn't going to come from your good intentions and your long-range plans ... it's going to come from what fuels you spiritually right now. It's going to come from where you see God, today. And where is that? Well, Jesus will tell us that ... in fact, just next week. "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 him. That's where we get filled up. That's where we gather the fruits of the spirit ... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. All of those things that we can't check out of the library, and we can't borrow from our neighbor next door. All of those things that are just there for us to gather.

I think those church folks who use this parable as a way to scare us all straight are missing the point. You don't fill your lamp because you're afraid you're going to get locked out of the Kingdom of Heaven. You don't stockpile oil because then you can turn everyone else away and feel better about yourself. No, you just stop at the filling station and fill your flask and take it with you, because you can't wait to meet the bridegroom. You fill it out of joy. That's the real value, when you think about it ... the desire to meet Jesus.

May we pray?

Loving God, be present in our waking, in our walking, in our speaking, in our silence. Go before us, act with us, stand by us. You, who know us better than we do ourselves, fill us with what we need to bless all to whom we speak and with whom we act today. This we pray, God of the moment, God of eternity, this day and always. Amen.