

*Lord, give us oil in our lamps to illumine your Word, and our lives.*

I love this snarky little story about the wise and foolish bridesmaids...

I think of it as the wise and foolish Girl Scouts... be prepared!  
But it doesn't make a ton of sense if we don't know what bridesmaids  
have to do with lamps, and why they had to wait so long for the bridegroom  
to come that they needed extra oil.

One beauty of parables is that any character or element can represent lots of  
things. But it's likely the bridegroom in Jesus' story was himself, or God.  
This is a story about patience – and it's easy to get impatient with God.  
Where is God? Why hasn't s/he come through?  
Jesus' audience was living under the harsh thumb of the Roman occupation,  
only the latest of many imperial invaders.  
And he knew that after he left the scene, there would be more waiting for his return.  
He needed followers who knew how to wait, and yet stay ready.

So in this story he doesn't talk about sheep or vineyards or lost sons –  
He talks weddings, bridesmaids.  
Scholars think that in the region around Bethlehem in Jesus' time weddings  
Involved processions – the bridesmaids would escort the bridegroom  
through the streets of the town to the waiting bride. So they needed lamps,  
or torches, and lamps need well trimmed wicks and plenty of oil.  
In this story, the bridegroom takes his sweet time arriving –  
so long that the bridesmaids fall asleep waiting for him.  
Jesus is telling his followers that they will be tempted to "fall asleep,"  
lose their awareness of God's activity around them, go back to seeing things  
in a purely human, secular way, if they don't learn to live spiritually awake.  
And he subtly reminds them that their mission will be to escort him, his spirit,  
into the hearts of the bride, the church – all who need Jesus' fiercely accepting love.

The wise bridesmaids in the story have thought ahead – they have kept their wicks  
trimmed and ready so the light will burn bright; they have brought extra oil.  
And when the foolish bridesmaids wake up and realize they are out of oil,  
the wise ones know they cannot share their own stock,  
or no one will have enough and there will be no light at all.

It's counter-intuitive, but when you give yourself away without replenishing, you have nothing left to give. And we are called to bring light.

We are called to shine Christ's light into every dark corner of this world.

We are called to bring light into conflicts and wars, wherever terror reigns.

We are to bring light to people in despair, locked in poverty or addiction.

We are to bring light into dark places of corruption and injustice, inequity.

The prophet Amos proclaimed:

*let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.*

We are called to escort Jesus through darkened streets to those who need his love.

We can't do that without oil in our lamps. And the oil is the Holy Spirit.

We have all kinds of associations to oil –

Oil is something that keeps machinery running, that protects things from cold, that protects the skin; after all, we even oil our babies.

Oil has all kinds of different meanings in the Bible –

Oil was used to anoint kings and priests – so it meant being holy and set apart.

In some parts of the early church, oil was a big part of baptismal rites –

people anointed their whole bodies with oil, and then their heads and hands, and the oil was a symbol, a stand-in for the Holy Spirit.

When our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry took office, he traveled around the church. He saw not only shrinking churches – as he moved around,

he discovered that many Episcopalians had never had an encounter with Christ.

I've seen this too – for too long we formed church-goers more than Christ-followers.

Friends, our primary allegiance needs to be to Christ, not to Christ Church.

And Christ calls us to care as much or more for the people who are not here than those who are. That's who our light is for.

You are here for a reason – I presume.

Something happened in your life that made you choose to be part of a community of faith, to spend time in the presence of God.

What was that something, or somethings?

When were you touched by the Holy Spirit?

When did you see the holy in ordinary life and say, "Wow?" Tell those stories!

Bishop Curry's response to what he discovered – dwindling churches full of people who had never had a real encounter with Jesus – was the Way of Love, seven spiritual practices to help focus our lives on Jesus, to get to know him.

That's what we are invited to invest in – a gradual turning of our lives in the direction of God, so that we get are awake and become tuned to the movement of God around us. For God is moving; God is acting. We do not only wait – we also join the Spirit everywhere we see God at work.

We cannot be contagious Christians without the Holy Spirit actively working in us. And the Holy Spirit seems to want an invitation.

Are we willing to make an investment in oil? In truly asking the Spirit to live in us? That requires investment – of time, of priorities, of an open heart.

We need to keep our wicks trimmed and get our lamps filled every day or we won't shine much of a light. How do we do that?

Spiritual practices. Disciplines, habits of the heart that turn us God-ward.

The Way of Love has seven practices for a Jesus-centered life:

**Turn** each day toward Jesus, the source of Light; **Learn** about him;  
 Deepen your relationship with him in **Prayer and Worship**,  
 Actively let him **ble**ss the world through you;  
**Go** to where his people need light, and **Rest** and be refilled.

You might have your own – walking, singing, sitting in silence.

Here at Christ Church we offer some ways to trim our wicks and fill our lamps:

- ◆ A daily dip into the Bible – you can read my daily reflection, *Water Daily*, which is emailed, podcasted and soon will be posted each day on our new website;
- ◆ daily prayer with others online at Night Prayers;
- ◆ weekly bible study online Wednesday evenings,
- ◆ Lunch & learn in person Thursdays at noontime.
- ◆ small groups that meet every other week for prayer and support
- ◆ periodic retreat mornings called “Spa for the Spirit.”
- ◆ Coming this Advent, we will engage in spiritual discovery together through a program called Living Compass – I hope you will join in.

Those and other practices that are meaningful for you will keep your lamps filled.

The question for us together, and for each of us personally is:

What darkness are we called to dance light into? What people?

As we catch that vision for where we are to dance light, it becomes our highest priority, and we will focus our life and faith and resources on that mission.

God can take care of those without enough oil; we can focus on our lamps.

Where and to whom will we carry God's light? **Amen.**

**Matthew 25:1-13**

Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

**Amos 5:18-24**

Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord:  
Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD?  
It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear;  
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake.  
Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?  
I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

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