

“Oil for My Lamp”

Meditation on Matthew 25:1-13

Nov. 12, 2017

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” ⁹But 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.” ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open to us.” ¹²But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.”¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Last Thursday night, about 15 of us gathered to make angels or Christmas trees out of our old hymnals. Pat Smith and other volunteers had done the same craft recently with our elementary Kids Klub. I guess they figured if the kids could do it, maybe the adults could, too! We had fun, folding and folding pages. Talking and laughing. Here’s what they look like after Pat has put on the finishing touches. The best part of the craft was being with my sisters and brothers in the Lord. We are friends, but not just friends. We are family!

That's what Pastor Frank Pomeroy's wife, Sherri, said about their congregation-- First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. She spoke on Monday, a day after a 26-year-old man walked into their worship service and opened fire, shouting, "You're gonna die."

Grandparents and mothers threw themselves on top of grandchildren and children, attempting to shield them from the bullets of Devin Kelley's assault rifle. He killed 26 people, including a pregnant woman with her unborn child. Twenty others were injured.

Frank and Sherri's 14-year old daughter, Annabelle, was among the fatalities. Later, people in the church would recall seeing the shooter, dressed all in black, at their fall festival a few days before. Some thought it was a good sign that he was attending the festival; maybe his heart was softening toward the church. He professed to be an atheist, posting rants on Facebook, calling Christians, "stupid."

On Monday, an emotional Sherri spoke to the media as Frank stood beside her. She thanked family, friends and "complete strangers" for the outpouring of love. She said that they had turned down reporters' invitations to speak about their daughter, celebrate her life. She didn't want their loss to overshadow the losses of others. "We lost more than Belle that day. The one thing that gives me a sliver of encouragement is that Belle was surrounded by her church family that she loved fiercely-- and vice versa. Our church was not comprised of members or parishioners. We were a close family. We ate together, we laughed together, we cried together and we worshiped together.

"Now most of our church family is gone. Our building is probably beyond repair. And the few of us that are left behind lost tragically

yesterday. As senseless as this tragedy was, our sweet Belle would not have been able to deal with losing so much family yesterday.”

After the shooting, I received an email from our executive presbyter, Dan Williams, with the subject line, “Church violence resources.” “We all were shocked, saddened, and grieved by another senseless act of violence within our nation this past Sunday, with the tragic mass shooting at a Baptist church in Sutherland Springs, Texas,” he says. “This followed a shooting at a church in Tennessee this past summer, and the one in Charleston, SC, over two years ago. These circumstances may be causing you to assess what can be done to guard against such events within your congregation.” “If anything,” he goes on, “these recent events remind us of the unpredictable nature of life, and the need to be prepared for any possibility. I urge all of our congregations to look into the issue of church security, and make plans now for how to deal with possible threats. Hopefully, such plans will never have to be used. But, it is better to be prepared than not.”

I didn’t need to look at the resources to know we are not prepared for what the church in Sutherland Springs experienced. “No place is safe,” I remember thinking. “Not even our house of worship.” I felt sad and a little afraid. I didn’t know it, but I needed more oil for my lamp.

Our gospel today is a passage from a long section on *preparedness*-- how we should live as we wait for Jesus to come again. As chapter 24 opens, Jesus teaches his disciples privately on the Mount of Olives, telling them that the Temple will be destroyed. They ask him when this will happen and what will be the signs of his return-- and the end of the

age. Wars and violence, Jesus says, nation rising against nation, famines and earthquakes, the rise of false prophets and false messiahs. People will hate his followers because of him. "The one who remains faithful to the end," he says, "will be saved." Then he tells 3 parables about the Kingdom, encouraging hopeful, faithful working, watching and waiting. For God alone knows the day of Christ's return.

The first parable is the faithful and unfaithful slave, put in charge of the household while the master goes away. "Blessed is the slave," Jesus says, "whom his master will find at work when he arrives." (24:46) The parable of the talents follows today's passage; the servants who have been good stewards of the master's wealth will be rewarded.

The section of preparedness leads to Jesus speaking of his return in glory, when the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Those who lived lives of compassion, mercy and generosity--feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting those in prison, and welcoming the stranger--will receive an eternal reward. "Truly I tell you," the king will say, "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Today's reading is the parable of the 10 "bridesmaids," or more literally "10 virgins" -- young, unmarried women. Calling them "bridesmaids" presumes that ancient Jewish wedding customs are the same as ours today, but they aren't. The unmarried women's role is to escort the bridegroom in a procession to his house for the wedding feast. They don't attend the ceremony and the proceedings where the families work out the financial settlement before the wedding. There is

an unexpected delay. All of the women fall asleep with their lamps, which burn maybe 15 minutes without needing more oil. Both the wise and the foolish women fall asleep. The wise have collected oil in jars to refill their lamps. They aren't going to miss the wedding feast, the high point of the celebration!

Much of the preaching on this passage focuses on the foolish women, who don't have oil to relight their lamps when they awake to a shout in the middle of the night. The bridegroom has arrived! But no one would have needed oil for lamps if the bridegroom hadn't arrived till morning. Those who were "foolish" may just have assumed that since it was so late, he wouldn't come till the next day.

But there were just as many wise women as foolish. The wise **were** ready with just enough oil for the journey, no more, no less. They weren't being mean in not sharing their oil. Everyone has to have their own oil for their own lamp or they cannot make the journey in the dark. Those who wait until the oil has run out and try to get some at the last minute, arrive too late at the banquet--and are barred from entry.

So what does this parable mean for us? The bridegroom is Jesus, who will return for His Church, His Bride, who, incidentally, isn't mentioned in this story. The wedding feast is the great celebration with Christ's return at the end of the age, when the Church comes from east and west and north and south to sit at table in the Kingdom of God.

And what is the oil? Theologians don't all agree. I feel certain that the oil is our faith in the righteousness of Jesus Christ--in his sacrifice for our sakes. This is what leads us to live righteously, mercifully, peacefully, and compassionately. The Lord responds to the foolish

women, who didn't have the oil of faith, "Truly, I don't know you." This brings to mind Hebrews 11:6, "Without faith, it is impossible to please God ..."

Faith leads us into relationship with Christ; we want to know Him, His Word and His will so that we might obey and be pleasing to Him.

And where does our faith originate? Hebrews 12:2 says Jesus is "the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Jesus provides the oil for our lamps. When we seek to follow him, he gives us more and more! Jesus, the light of the world, illumines our way.

Since the shootings last Sunday, I have been thinking about and praying for the little Baptist church. Working as a religion journalist taught me that this kind of pain may be too much for a congregation to bear. It will be hard for them to carry on.

Pastor Frank said he wouldn't go back to the building. The structure will become a memorial to those who died. Frank said he would lead worship for the remnant on a baseball field. He hopes they will be able to build a new church on another property someday.

I urge you to pray for this little church, our brothers and sisters, though they are already "old news." Live each day as the Master's faithful stewards. Seek to build up and not tear down. Don't take your congregation for granted. Treasure these precious moments we share in worship and fellowship. Every day, we draw nearer to the heavenly banquet. But our Bridegroom walks beside us--guiding and

strengthening us through these dark days. And he is coming soon, though God alone knows when.

Keep your lamp brightly burning. Don't let your oil run out!

Trust the source to give you more and more faith!

Jesus, the light of the world, will illumine our way.

Let us pray. Holy One, we thank you for your gift of faith--that we hope in the promise of your unconditional love, forgiveness and eternal life through your Son. Thank you for our family of faith--for the love we have for one another and for this place of worship you have provided for us. Help us to be more grateful for what we have and never take our congregation for granted. And we ask that you would help the little church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, find a new home. We pray that the church would go on and grow larger and stronger than before. We ask for comfort and healing for all who lost loved ones in the shootings last Sunday. Let us all feel your loving presence throughout this journey until we are together at the heavenly wedding feast, when all tears and pain have passed away. Until then, give us oil in our lamps. Keep us burning brightly so that all the world may come to know you. In His name we pray. Amen.