

Empty and Filled

Matthew 25:1-13

We gained an hour last weekend, and needed it after a night homecoming game at Jack Trice, but we've lost sunlight. It now gets dark early, and the days will only get shorter for the next month or so. While we hear more about it in January, this can be a time when people are affected by seasonal affective disorder, struggling with depression as we experience less and less light.

It's easy for us to forget how much darkness there has been in the world. We live in a world where light can be summoned by flipping a switch, pressing a button, or even just clapping your hands. Lights from watches and cell phones give us ready sources of light, even if we don't carry a flashlight in our pockets or on our key-chains. In his book *At Home*, author Bill Bryson reminds us that by the simple act of opening a refrigerator door, we create more light than the total amount in most houses in the eighteenth century. Light comes easily to us.

In today's parable, we're reminded of how hard it was to keep the light on for most of history. Ten bridesmaids are waiting for the bridegroom to return. They all have lamps, they all have oil, and they're all supposed to be ready for when the bridegroom comes. It's a time of joyful expectation. Yet the bridegroom is late in coming, and so all of the bridesmaids fall asleep. They all fail to keep watch. They all fail to keep awake. They all let their lamps go out and the light fade.

But half of them, five of them, have extra oil. They were prepared to wait. They were prepared for the bridegroom to suddenly appear. They were prepared even if they fell asleep. The foolish ones had to run and try to

find some more in a hurry, late at night after all of the stores had closed, and they ended up missing the party.

When Jesus tells this parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, He's talking to his disciples, alone, as the time draws near for him to head to the cross. Knowing that he's going to leave them soon, he gives them final encouragement, final words of advice. He tells them this parable so they will keep watch, and stay ready.

How do we explain the actions of the five wise bridesmaids who are unwilling to share their oil? Especially on stewardship Sunday, when we're reminded of all we have been given by God and how we are called to use all we have for God's purposes, not our own?

One way that's helpful to think about it is to think about riding in an airplane. One of the safety briefings before takeoff always reminds passengers, in the event that the cabin loses pressure and the oxygen masks deploy, that they are to put on their own mask first before helping someone else put their mask on. That may seem selfish, but you're no good to anyone if you can't breathe.

The wise ones act the same way. In the context of the parable, if they shared their oil, no one would have enough for their lamps. Then there would be no light at all, which would be worse than only half the light there was supposed to be.

As we wait for Jesus to return, we need to be ready. We ourselves need to be ready. No one else can be ready for us. While there's debate over exactly what the oil in the parable

represents, whether it's the Holy Spirit or the Word of God or faith or something else entirely, we know it's something that cannot be shared, cannot be passed on, cannot be taken from someone else.

The words of this parable continue to inspire and confuse. The earliest Christians didn't think they had long to wait. They thought that Jesus would return soon, within the lifetime of those first disciples. As they watched and waited, they wondered why they were kept waiting. They wondered why Jesus the bridegroom continued to delay returning to bring his bride, the church, home.

We don't know when Jesus will return. We don't know when we will go to see Jesus. We don't know if it will be when Jesus returns, or if it will be when we are called home. We don't know when we will join those who have gone before us in the faith, those we remember as we celebrate All Saints Day. We just know that those who have gone before us in the faith have kept their lamps trimmed and burning, and helped us to do the same.

But while we wait for Jesus to return, as disciples of Jesus, we wait with hope. We wait full of joy. We wait and hope as members of the waiting and hoping church, but the church cannot hope and be ready for us, any more than the church can believe or love for us.

The patience that Christians are commanded to live out is based on the patience of God. The endurance of God, the long-suffering of God, the willingness to stick with things of God. We see that throughout the Old Testament. God is continually patient and long suffering in regards to the people of Israel. No matter how many times they stray away, no matter how many

times that they go to worship other gods, God is always there giving them a second, third, fourth chance. God promises judgment and wrath, but delays it so that there is a chance for repentance. "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). That's why the bridegroom delays his return. That's why we're still waiting. That's why we are called to keep our lamps of faith burning, shining into the dark parts of the world.

When God fills the empty, He often does so using others. That's where stewardship comes in. We may not be able to share "oil" when Jesus returns, but we can share all that we've been given until then. We can share the hope we have that Jesus will return. We can share what has been entrusted to us, to fill the empty around us. We can let God's love and blessings fill us to overflowing, and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

Because of God's patience, because of what Jesus patiently endured for us on the cross, we too can wait patiently. We are given the strength to endure through our own times of doubt and despair, of trial and temptation, of emptiness and out of fuel feelings. We are given the oil to keep our lamps burning. We can endure the hardships that come our way. We can wait for God with brightly shining lamps of faith to light the way in this dark world.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,
Ames, Iowa
Stewardship Sunday
November 12, 2023