

**No Shortage**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Matthew 25:1-13**  
**November 12, 2017**

This morning, let's read our text in a traditional way. Let's assume it's an allegory. The bridegroom is the Christ. The ten maidens are church-going folks like you and me. The wedding banquet is the kingdom of heaven – that place or space or Holy Communion we're given a foretaste of in the presence of Jesus.

The bridegroom has gone off to attend to his business, presumably negotiating a dowry in order to bring home his bride. But there's a traffic jam on I-485 and he's been delayed, and he forgot his cell phone charger. It could be twenty minutes, it could be an hour, it could be all night, it could be longer. But don't worry, he's coming.

Ten attendants await the bridegroom's arrival. They'll serenade the new couple with torches held high – it'll be super festive. Think Lady Guinevere arriving to the pomp and circumstance of Camelot. And for offering this important welcome, the maidens will be rewarded with entrance into a grand gala.

But all maidens aren't the same. Some of them keep Google calendars. They always bring a water bottle and trail mix on a hike, or a jacket to the movie theatre for when it gets cold. And they always, always, always have Kleenex in their purses, and a stack of mismatched fast-food napkins in their glove compartments, because you just never know when you'll need them. And yes of course, some maidens keep a healthy supply of lamp oil for bridegrooms, who despite their best intentions, are always running past schedule.

And then of course, there are absent-minded maidens who would forget their heads and extremities if they weren't attached, let alone an extra can of kerosene. And maidens who expect someone else will be accountable: someone's always got an umbrella to spare, why not some lamp oil, too? Or maidens who don't take time to listen, or to pay attention, or to slow down and realize what's really important.

In the end, five have provisions to spare. Five don't. But prepared or not, each must rest. And their sleep lasts longer than their torches. And when our belated bridegroom finally arrives in the wee hours of the morning, only half of our maidens are ready to embrace the moment. The other five must scurry off to find a 24-hour Walmart with a camping section.

But entrances and events are time-sensitive creatures. They aren't well-suited for mulligans. The moment is fleeting, and once it's gone, it's gone. And so five maidens, prepared and alert enjoy the party. And five maidens, idle and distracted stand outside, the door no longer open.

The traditional takeaway for the parable being that we have no way to predict when Christ will return. We are to live as if it could happen soon, which means we must be prepared and ready. And even though the grains of sand in the hourglass drip slow, and give us plenty of opportunities, that hourglass will eventually be empty. And as Coach Wooden says, "When the opportunity has arrived, it's too late to prepare." So be wise and take heed. For the foolish will be left wanting.

I've paraphrased our text, and I've taken a few liberties with various commentaries. But it's funny. Today is one of those days when each of the commentaries I prepared with left me wanting something

more. Something different. And to be very candid, I really don't like the ending of our text, or where this traditional interpretation leads us. And that's mainly because I'm left with more questions than answers:

I know it's a parable, and we're using an analogy. But lamp oil is a commodity. It's finite. And some days it might be in scarce supply. Some days, you might just be lucky enough to have it because you were in the right place at the right time. And some days, no matter how hard you try, there may not be any oil to be had. I wasn't old enough to experience the gas crisis of the late seventies, nor the rations of the world wars, but I doubt that everyone who lacked enough fuel or supplies in those days did so because of idleness or unpreparedness. In some cases, they just didn't have access. Or even a little luck.

Or maybe those five women were dirt poor. They brought what they had in the hopes that either their peers or their master would offer them understanding. I know the text calls them foolish. But is that accurate? Or is that a label offered from the seat of privilege or the seat of righteousness?

You are so foolish!!! If you'd just go get a license it'd be no problem to vote. If you'd only bought health insurance, you wouldn't have to worry about that bill. If you'd just get a job, you wouldn't be late on your mortgage. If you wouldn't waste your money on a cell phone you could easily pay your light bill. All you have to do is prepare and be alert.

And on the other hand, just how wise were those other five maidens? Did they have time to stock up on lamp oil because they actually had a job that gave them a lunch hour to go looking, or a wage that gave them enough to buy their extra share?

When the hour comes, the haves, the wise ones, the ones with the extra oil, tell the have-nots, the foolish ones, "No! There will not be enough for you and for us. So go get it somewhere else."

And to me, that's where this allegory falls apart. The lamp oil is supposed to be the substance of faith that offers us entrance to the banquet. It's the material we acquire – our lessons, our scriptures, our prayers, our acts of kindness, our reception of God's spirit. The oil is that piece of God that we've allowed to shape our very being. It's the stuff that transforms us. Matter of fact, Tillie tells me its Jesus himself.

And here's what I'd like to know – when did God's spirit, that thing that fills us and shapes us become a finite commodity to be divided among the wise and the foolish. When did Jesus say there's not enough of me to go around, or there's no more room at my table?

Friends, I may be a fool – a fool whose homiletics professor would also say a foolish exegete – but I will tell you with a certainty that goes beyond the good book we study, the spirit that fills you and me is not finite. It is not to be hoarded. It is not to be confined. It is not to be underestimated. It is not to be likened to a Black Friday sale. And it is not to be watered down by threats of judgment.

No, we do not have control over when and how and even if Christ returns. And yes, we do have some accountability in the matter. A lot, I believe. We are fortunate enough to be infused with God's spirit, and knowing such a grace, we are called to respond to and use the gifts it inspires in us and in others. Because we know the presence of God in our lives, accountability is both necessary and inevitable.

But again, God's spirit is not finite. And it's not enough for us to be wise. And it's not enough for us saunter into the banquet, ignoring the foolish. I believe that we have to ask the question, "What makes us wise to God? And if we are fortunate to acquire such wisdom, and to be filled with the joy such wisdom brings, are we ready to share that wisdom with others. In other words, once we've filled up our oil tank, are we willing to help other learn to fill theirs? Because when there are ten maidens, it's not enough for only five of them to have their fill.

Friends, we know neither the day nor the hour. But in this hour, we will invite the bridegroom to join us at a table. And there is plenty of oil to light your torch. And if you care to make this table a regular stop on your journey, I dare say your supply will never run short, no if matter if you are wise or foolish.

Amen.