

GIVE ME OIL IN MY LAMP!

Matthew 25:1-13

A devout Christian who had a cat used to spend several minutes each day at prayer and meditation in his bedroom. He read a portion of Scripture and a devotional book, followed by a period of silent meditation and prayer. As time went on, his prayers became longer and more intense.

He came to cherish this quiet time in his bedroom, but his cat came to like it too. She would cozy up to him, purr loudly, and rub her furry body against him. This interrupted the man's prayer time. So, he put a collar around the cat's neck and tied her to the bedpost whenever he wanted to be undisturbed while at prayer. This didn't seem to upset the cat, and it meant that the man could meditate without interruption.

Over the years, the daughter of this devout Christian had noted how much her father's devotional time had meant to him. When she began to establish some routines and patterns with her own family, she decided she should do as her father had done. She was very dutiful. She too tied her cat to the bedpost and then proceeded to her devotions. But she just couldn't find as much time to spend in prayer as her father.

The day came when her son grew up and wanted to make sure that he preserved some of the family traditions which had meant so much to his mother and his grandfather. But he could find even less time than his mother and there just weren't enough hours in the day for those elaborate devotional proceedings. So he eliminated the time for meditation, Bible reading and prayer. But in order to carry on the religious tradition, each day while he was dressing, he tied the family cat to the bedpost.

I wonder if that story might be a parable that captures at least some of what Amos is raging about in our first reading today. And I wonder if it might also complement our Gospel's parable about being prepared. Let's check in with Amos first. What's going on here?" Take away from me the noise of your songs?" Huh?

Here's what I know: God has made a covenant with the people of Israel. But the grandchildren of those people have lost the true sense of what that covenant is all about. They confuse form with substance, rites (r-i-t-e-s, not r-i-g-h-t-s) with righteousness. They concoct elaborate worship experiences to pay homage to a God whose primary concern is justice and righteousness. It's all incongruous. It doesn't line up. Where is the integrity? The rich are living in the lap of luxury while the poor are afflicted, exploited, even sold into slavery. The judges are corrupt. To top it off, the people of Israel are smug. They think that the only thing necessary to fulfill their part of the covenant God had made with their grandparents is to have great worship. And today we hear God, through the mouth of Amos, tell them otherwise: "You can't just rest on the laurels of your ancestors, or ride on the coattails of your grandparents." My covenant has no grandchildren. The people of Israel are tying the cat to the bedpost and calling that a life of faith. And that is not OK.

What about our Gospel from Matthew? What's going on in *this* parable? *This* reading may make us squirm almost as much as Amos does today. These poor bridesmaids are shut out – door slammed – sorry. You didn't bring that extra oil. Too bad so sad. But for goodness sake. The bridegroom *was* late, after all! Where is the justice and righteousness here? How does the punishment fit the crime?

I remember a wedding I presided over once when the attendants were not prepared. Only it wasn't the bridesmaids. It was the groomsmen. And it wasn't oil they forgot. It was socks. Every single

groomsman, and the groom too for that matter. All the men in the wedding party showed up for the wedding without socks. Did I shut the door on them? No – of course not! Fortunately their pants were long enough to hide their bare ankles. No one knew. Except me.

The more time I spend with Scripture and the more I just navigate through life, I have come to understand that judgment can be the consequences of my own actions. I wonder, if Jesus wanted to make his point today, he might tell *this* story: “The kingdom of heaven will be like this. A young girl was given an old car by her parents to take to college her senior year so she could drive to the schools where she would do her student teaching. She kept the car and went on to graduate school and then to seminary in Chicago. But she was foolish. All those years she never had the oil changed. One Sunday morning when she was driving up Lake Shore Drive to get to the church where she was assigned, the car just stopped. It was the Day of the Lord. She was caught unprepared. She couldn’t borrow oil from anyone else. That wouldn’t fix the problem. The car was dead. It had to be towed. The door was shut. All because of her foolishness.”

That young girl, of course, was me. And you’d think I would have learned. But it happened again. But this time the stakes were higher. This time it wasn’t about oil in my car, or even gas. I’ve done that too though. I ran out of gas once on Plymouth Rd., heading to a lunch date at the old Lord Fox. Same thing. My foolishness meant I was unprepared. And there was a consequence.

But the time I’m referring to, when the stakes were higher, was in the last congregation I served. That was where I ran out of oil again. I let myself get burned out. I was tying the cat to the bedpost – thinking about planning worship and running a church – and neglecting my own life of prayer. And just like my old car, I burned out. Fortunately my burn-out coincided with my husband’s sabbatical. Barry and I moved to Washington DC for a year and we *both* had a sabbatical. I learned about the practice of centering prayer and I found a centering prayer group at St. Columba Episcopal Church. You see, I’m not unlike you – and everyone else in the human race. I go for the oil only when a personal problem brings awareness of a personal need. I needed and I continue to need to rest in the presence of God. When I do that, the challenges life brings don’t go away, but I manage myself differently through them. I’m not walking alone. And it doesn’t cost a penny except for the time I spend.

Centering Prayer has become the oil in my life that keeps my lamps trimmed and burning. And Centering Prayer is also something I am eager to introduce to you as your interim rector during this time of transition. Stay tuned. One of the inevitable pitfalls of life in the church is becoming too dependent on the priest – as if the priest is the “paid Christian.” But that’s like trying to borrow oil. Every one of you is called to a life of ministry – here and in the world -- by virtue of your baptism into Christ’s life, death and resurrection and by virtue of the gifts God has given you – gifts you are called to use; gifts we need in order for this community to be all that God intends it to be. That’s why we say, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord” each week.

Like the maidens in the parable, we can’t borrow and lend this oil – from the priest or even from our grandparents. Now don’t get me wrong – there are definitely times when we need to borrow *light* from each other – sometimes just to find a way to take the next step in the darkness. But ultimately, we are each responsible for our *own* oil, for keeping our own lamps trimmed and burning, so that the light of Christ can shine in us and through us, and illumine the path before us, especially during times of transition. And so, part of my calling among you is to empower you in your faith and in your serving, and to help you find ways both individually and collectively to “reduce your dependence on foreign oil.” [Here’s another way to put it, courtesy of an 8 o’clocker echoing a challenge Father Bob Miller

once put forth to you during a transition: "Priest Lisa is not the church. Pastor Dana is not the church. *You* are the church - so turn in your @\$% pledge cards!"]

Today you're given an opportunity to be filled with oil of another kind: the presence of Christ in bread and wine. You who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time. You who have much faith, and you who would like to have more. You who have tried to follow Jesus, and you who have failed. You who pray daily and you who can barely manage to tie the cat to the bedpost. You whose lamps shine brightly and you whose lamps have burned out. It is Christ who invites each and every one of us to meet him right here, right now, to rest in his presence, and be filled. Amen.

Pastor Dana Runestad

12 November 2017 ~ Year A Proper 27

St. John's Episcopal Church ~ Plymouth MI