

Matthew 25:1-13  
Got Oil? / Emory Presbyterian Church  
November 6, 2008/ Larry Owens

Congratulations! You made history last week! No matter whom you voted for personally, the resounding message heard round the world reaffirmed the belief that this country is still a place where dreams are born and realized.

Of course, naïve optimism is usually short-lived (just ask Sarah Palin), and we long for something we could really lose our hearts to. The truth is, if we live long enough, most of us find that things like politics, money, power, sex, and all such other hallucinogens either become too toxic or lose their magic all together.

But what if we found *Something* that we could really believe in? Some great *Something* that so captured our imaginations that we could hardly think about anything else; *Something* that reached beyond all our calculated attempts to establish the meaning of our lives through progeny, job security, stock portfolios, property values, and war. *Something* that replaced those snakes under our bed at midnight with the joyful restlessness of a child waiting for Christmas morning!

Apparently, our Gospel writer, Matthew, has indeed found *Something* to believe in. He described it as the Kingdom of God. For several weeks now you've been listening to your preacher wrestle with the stories Jesus used to describe that kingdom.

Quite honestly, it hasn't been easy reading. For a couple of reasons: first, because Jesus' stories about the kingdom seems to include a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth (apparently, one of Matthew's favorite refrains) and, secondly, because the stories used to whet the appetite for such a kingdom are themselves so full of violence. We see angels swooping down to separate the bad weed from the good wheat and tossing the imposters into the flames, we've seen the all-forgiving King who reverses his decision and slams his servant in the poorhouse when the ungrateful jerk refuses to forgive the debt of an underling, we see an absentee landlord who wipes out his tenant farmers after they go on a killing spree, we see a Man who goes to the streets to find folks who will come to his party then throws out a guest because he's not wearing the right clothes, and now we come to today's parable about the arrogant Bridegroom who arrives late for his own wedding then, in a tone of cruel indifference, turns away half the bridesmaids when they didn't make it to the church on time.

First time hearers of these stories have to be confused. Glimpses of hard-nosed kings and no-nonsense Bridegrooms, kind one moment and vengeful the next, send mixed messages. How can you get your heart around a story like that? Today, the Church is wringing its hands over all the members who have wandered away from the pews and never found their way back. Well, no wonder! These parables confound us (as Jesus said they were intended to do). They leave us with lots of questions, not knowing what to expect next. One minute, the Big Guy loves you, but you screw up and the next minute he may reject you, even kill you. I'm surprised any of you are here this morning!!

But since you are here, you must be the die-hards. The ones willing to hang around and do the heavy lifting. The ones who somehow know deep in their hearts that the truth of the matter lies somewhere just below the surface of all this parabolic confusion. And, like C.S. Lewis, you've made peace with the Great Aslan whose kingly roar causes the heart to quiver but whose ways, though wild and unmanageable, can always be trusted. If you ARE one of those, and not just here this morning because your mother made you come, then you also know that Lovers don't have to explain how or why, they just are, and such is the Mystery of heaven.

I believe that if we're going to get to the heart of our story today, we've got to step back and see how Matthew understood this Jesus. You may recall that Matthew begins with the birth of a very human Jesus, whose lineage was traced all the way back to Abraham. He's born into a world full of power politics where babies can be killed when the government feels threatened. And into this very political world, Jesus comes announcing yet another system of government, the Kingdom of God, which he summarizes in that Sermon on the Mount. It was, in fact, the NEW LAW Jesus was handing down, in the same way that Moses had handed down the OLD LAW, the Ten Commandments. Those so blessed to be in the kingdom will be merciful, compassionate, meek, longsuffering, hungry for the right, determined to make peace with a pure heart, and willing to endure the onslaught of those who resent their presence in the world. They'll be salt and light in the world, they'll resist anger and insult, they'll resist the human tendency to dominate and use others. Why, they'll even love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. They'll resist greed and rely consciously on the goodness of God that clothes the flowers of the field. They'll do unto others as they would have others do unto them. Quite a list! But what a kingdom it would be! What a wonderful place to live!

Such a sermon sounded good until Jesus began to live it out before a watching world full of people who decided they were more comfortable with that old time religion based on appeasing an offended god. And one might say that's when the cat was set among the pigeons. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, was suddenly marked as a political rebel, a threat to the economic stability of the Jewish culture and a blasphemous religious nutcase who needed, as the Chief Priest observed, to be disposed of before he took the whole nation down with him.

Now fastforward to Jesus' last week with his disciples. They're all upset that he's leaving and they all want to know the details about "The End Times." Clearly, those terrible "Day of the LORD" stories they'd all grown up on weren't his main concern. He knew he was about to undo all that gloom and doom of a raging mad God who wasn't going to take it any more. He knew that just hours later... Instead of God coming down to kill us (as everyone expected on that Last Day) God was going to let us kill him, as if to say, "Enough! Stop the violence! Let's end it once and for all! From now on let the Kingdom of Heaven come to earth and rule forever!" And it was THAT new story — the Story of Kingdom Come — that he was going to hand over to twelve people. He didn't want to leave behind a bunch of disciples all caught up in predicting the end of history. HE wanted disciples who would *make* history by living out this kingdom in real space and

time. He was looking for disciples with torches to light up the streets for Him when he suddenly appeared at midnight.

No doubt, that's what this parable is all about. In Jesus' time, weddings were a big deal. And they all began with a dramatic anticipatory ritual. Bridegrooms would suddenly ride into town late at night, ready to consummate the marriage right then with all the townsfolk just waiting to cheer them on then join them for a party that would last for days. The bridesmaids had a big job: As soon as the Groom appeared, they were to light up the parade route with their torches, waking the whole town to his presence as if to say, "At last he's here — right here among us! Let the games begin!"

The problem is that half of these dear girls, for all their good intentions, didn't bring what they needed to do their job. Their torches had dried out and they didn't have any oil to soak 'em. Frantically, they tried to borrow from the others but some things you just can't borrow from somebody else, not at the last minute, no matter how much you wish you could. Now was the Time they'd all been waiting for, but these girls missed the party because they ran off in all directions trying to find what they didn't have.

It's my sense that the American Church is carrying around a lot of dried torches today. Recently, a survey of young adults in this country said that the three most common perceptions of a Christians are that we are anxiously anti-homosexual (an image held by 91% of the folks surveyed), that we are generally judgmental (87%), and that we are deeply lacking in the ability to be self-critical (85%). How sad that the very attitudes that Jesus scolded the religious elites for are the very things for which we Christians are now known. Not a lot of light in that for a world stumbling around in the darkness. And the Church is so sluggish we don't even know our lamps are dry! We just know we're tired of waiting and bored with what is and, well, that we just want a nap.

But listen, friends, *even now the Bridegroom is riding through the countryside in search of folks who will celebrate the end of violence and the coming of a kingdom where lepers are being healed, and the blind are seeing, and the dead are rising and the poor are finally hearing some good news, for God's sake!* He's looking for folks who will preach what he preached, love what he loved, live the way he lived. He's looking for people just like you and me who will follow so closely in his footsteps that we'll get his dust on us.

Emory Church, don't you want to be a part of all that! That's something you can believe in! Live for! Invest your money in! Even die for! Because as sure as God lives, the promise is 100% guaranteed and will surely come to pass that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever!

Do you believe that this morning? Oh, I know most of you have a torch for Jesus but what about the oil to light it...have you got that? "Well," you say, "where can I find it and how much will it cost?"

Good questions. First, you'll find it wherever you find Jesus in the world. He's out there among the poor, and the sick, the oppressed and the imprisoned, the naked and the stranger. In fact, he knew all along that any Final Judgment about the value of our lives is not about a God who comes to destroy us but a Jesus who waits for us, hidden away in the broken lives of others. Right there, in the midst of those folks, is where the kingdom we pray for is coming.

How much does it cost? From the world's point of view, it will cost a lot. Ours is not a very hospitable world for visionaries. Charlatans abound! Here in the West, Gospel radicalism is still dismissed by those who favor a more practical Christian realism. It's not easy to make room for the least of these in a dollar-driven, power-worshipping world that has given free reign to the militaries of empires and the exploitation of earth and her inhabitants. C. W. Mills once put it in his *Pagan Sermon to a Christian Clergy* that "in our world necessity and realism have become ways to hide lack of moral imagination."

But the Good News is that once your torch is burning bright, you'll find your way in the darkness. You'll clearly see that there's the Joy of Abundant Life to be had around you, so that money will signify little more than a last-grab for control by dying Caesars.

"Oh that just sounds like too much work. I'll just say my prayers and wait for Jesus." As one preacher put it, "The truth is the way we wait for Jesus is not by waiting for Jesus....but doing what Jesus said do."

How about you? Ready for something you can believe in? Something you can really get excited about and commit yourself to? Something that's more about Joy than Duty, Love than Obligation? Something that once you take hold of it, it will then take hold of you in some surprisingly new ways?

Then pick up your torch, and let's go find some oil while we still have time. Be sure, He's on his way but if we hurry we can use this time of grace to work some things out, to make some changes, to do some good so that when He does come we can wink at him and say, "We knew it was you....we've been waiting — can you tell?!"