

Sermon for Proper 27A  
Sunday, November 12, 2017  
“Keep oil in the lamps”

Text: Matthew 25:1-13

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I’ve been to a lot of weddings; I’m sure many of you here have been to a wedding as well. Weddings differ from place to place, culture to culture. Weddings are an investment of a lot of time and a lot of money. American weddings are generally the result of months of preparation and planning, dealing with wedding planners, binders with scores of dresses, tuxes, churches, and reception venues, guest lists, invitations, all for the long-awaited day, for a few hours of ceremony, revelry, eating, drinking, and dancing. Weddings in other cultures are celebrated over a week’s time with several days of celebration, which includes the nuptials. The parable in today’s gospel presumes knowledge of how weddings took place in biblical times. Marriages were said to occur in four stages. First, the groom, or more often, the father of the groom made the arrangements for the marriage and paid the bride price—a dowry. Often this occurred when the future bride and groom were children, but otherwise it was about a year before the marriage itself. Often the bride and groom did not even meet until their wedding day. This was the betrothal, and it was a legally-binding contract. Then at the time of the marriage—sometimes years later—was the fetching of the bride; the bridegroom would go to the home of the bride in order to bring her to his home, and it was usually done at night. Next came the wedding ceremony. Only a few people would be invited and, unlike weddings today when we typically wait around until the bride arrives, back then, the invited guests would wait around until the groom arrived with his bride. This is where we are in today’s gospel parable. Prior to the wedding ceremony, the bride would undergo a ritual immersion for ritual cleansing, then the marriage would take place, and the new couple would go into the bridal chamber to consummate the marriage. Following the consummation, the marriage feast would take place and could last for as many as seven days. Many people would be invited to the feast. It was a big party. The Wedding at Cana was a wedding feast, which is why it was such a big deal when they ran out of wine.

So in the story, they did not know exactly when the bridegroom would arrive with his wife and the bridesmaids were supposed to bring lamps to provide light because the bridegroom was likely to arrive during the night. These weren't battery-operated lamps, there was no electricity, lamps had to be lit with oil. Five of the bridesmaids in today's parable did not go out and buy extra oil; they were unprepared for the delay of the bridegroom, and when he did arrive, in the middle of the night, they didn't have enough oil to last for the necessary things that were to take place after the betrothed couple arrived.

This parable is full of allegorical elements. Remember, an allegory is a story where the people, places, and events are meant to convey a deeper meaning. Matthew's Gospel was written after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD for a community of believers who were eagerly awaiting Jesus's return to usher in the final judgment. The bridesmaids represent the church awaiting the Second Coming; the bridegroom is Christ; the wedding feast is the celebration that awaits when Christ returns for the Church; the delay of the bridegroom is the delay in Christ's coming that the church was experiencing at that time; his arrival is Christ's ultimate return; and, the closing of the door is the final judgment. Over 2,000 years have passed since then, and we're still waiting. This parable reminds us that we must stay prepared because we don't know when Jesus will return to usher in the final establishment of the Kingdom of God. In the meantime, we have work to do here on earth to prepare for that great day. We have work to do preparing the world for the coming kingdom. That's where we, the church, come in. And in order to prepare the world, we have to get our own house in order.

Today, in our conversation about stewardship and how we must give back to God a portion of the gifts he has given us, we will be talking about money. Giving of our treasure. God has provided many things for us through his abundance of creation, how we are charged to take care of those things, and how we are expected to offer a portion of the gifts God has given us in thanksgiving for his undeserved generosity. So, what about the oil? What does the oil in the lamp mean for us? In an allegory, the oil could mean many things, but I would offer to you this suggestion, that in our conversation about stewardship, the oil represents our inextinguishable faithfulness in God that moves us to thank him for his generosity by giving something back to his honor, glory and the welfare

of his people. One way we do that is through the giving of our treasure. Not all of it—just 10%.

10% is the biblical tithe. We offer a portion of our treasure in addition to our time and our talent. A few weeks ago, the reading from the Gospel showed Jesus telling the scribes and Pharisees to give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. The government takes our money in the form of taxes; we don't like paying taxes, but Caesar gets our money anyway. Our taxes pay for schools for our children, safe streets, smooth roads, someone to collect our garbage twice a week, military to protect our country, health care for the elderly, and many other things we benefit from. The money we give to God does the same thing; it pays for the day-to-day operations of the church—the lights, the gas, water, insurance, the priest, music. If we don't support those things, we can't keep our doors open and we can't do ministry, which we are now doing in partnership with All Saints Lutheran.

Your support is needed for the ministry of the church in the present, and to secure that we will continue to do ministry in the future. Bishop Provenzano's message to us last week spoke to ways that we can help secure the future of All Saints Church long after we are gone, through planned giving and bequests. But there are other ways that you can leave a legacy. God-willing, we will soon be starting construction on the parish hall. I met with the final two contractors, one of whom should be selected to go forward with the project. We're going to need to furnish the new space, and shortly, you will be presented with opportunities to help with that effort. You could also help beautify the temple, so that we can continue to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. We need new complete sets for the chancel. Right now nothing matches. Look at my chasuble. First of all, it's too big! Many of our vestments were fitted for a man who was either much taller or wider, but they are too big for the average size man or woman. Plus, they're supposed to match the paraments which we see adorning the chancel—the altar, the pulpit and the lecturn. None of our sets match. They are all bits and pieces of different sets acquired over the years or inherited from St. Matthew's. We need sets that match and vestments that fit. Come talk to me if you are moved to help leave a legacy of that sort.

Our money also helps support all of the ministries we do here: community outreach, music, pastoral care and inreach, ministry to youth, ministry to young adults, and hopefully new ministries that we don't have currently. And a portion of our budget goes to the Diocese to support the ministry of the larger church; we are expected to tithe as well; the bishop reinforced this at convention yesterday, but at present, we are paying less than our 10%.

Those are the realities of why we bother to ask for money. But that's not the reason why you should tithe. Tithing is actually an act of faith and a statement of our faithfulness. Tithing is one way of saying, "I believe that God will provide. He provided for me, and I'm going to give a portion back, because I believe that God will continue to provide." But more than that, Genesis Chapter 2 says that humans are supposed to take care of God's creation. We are supposed to take care of our bodies; I hope you're doing that—keeping up with your health, seeing the doctor regularly, eating healthy. And we are supposed to take care of our environment; I hope you're recycling.

And I hope that you will support the gift that God has given us in this place by giving a portion of the treasure God has blessed you with. It's not always easy. There are many things that drains our paychecks—rent, mortgage, school tuition, health, car, home insurance, gas for our cars, taking care of our families, food, medicine. Some of you may be living on a fixed income. Some of you may be between jobs. You may have so many expenses that 10% is a strain. God knows that. Just strive for the goal. Tithing is a discipline. It's a goal you can work toward. Ask God to help you give him the first fruits of your labors that he is due.

That's the kind of faithfulness and discipline we should work toward having. That's the kind of faithfulness and discipline that demonstrates a trust that God will provide all we need. That's the kind of faithfulness and discipline that shows that we have taken extra oil for our lamps and are prepared for Christ's return. All we need to do is trust God and obey his mandate to us to take care of his creation. Also, parents, show your kids how you are faithful and that you trust God. Teach them to tithe too. Make them pledge! Even if it's 50¢ a week, teach them the discipline of giving something back to God. Teaching them is part of our Baptismal Covenant to continue the apostles' teaching and to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

Our stewardship theme is “Give generously of the little that you have, and the Lord will reward with abundance.” All God asks is that we take care of the things he has given us and trust him enough to return a tenth of it back to him, which he will multiply and bless us all the more! Amen.

### Resources

“The Jewish Wedding Analogy” in <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/revelation/related-topics/the-jewish-wedding-analogy.html>

“The Parable of the Ten Virgins” in *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/jamieson/jfb.xi.i.xxvii.html>

*Sermon Writer*, <http://www.lectionary.org/SW/11-09jf/Matt.25.1-13.htm>

*The Working Preacher*, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2207](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2207)