

“Ready to Tell the Story!”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Matthew 25:1-13

Have you ever run out of gas? I don't mean when the gas gage needle is hovering around the quarter tank mark, which is what my wife calls “out of gas.” I mean car stalled on the side of the road, won't run, because you are out of gas. It has never happened to me as a driver, largely because it happened to my sister when I was in the car with her, so I swore it would never happen to me. I was thirteen, and it was the summer before my sister would start college. My sister and I had just become friends-- our five years apart had kept us at a distance unless we were torturing each other for most of our childhood, but her upcoming departure for college made us realize we not only loved each other as sisters are supposed to do; we also actually *liked* each other, and so we sort of crammed years of missed friendship into one summer. So we were riding through downtown Atlanta in her ancient Volkswagen convertible. While the wind rushed my hair I sensed a taste of the freedom adulthood would one day bring me. The car slowed down, and though Alice pressed the gas pedal further to the floor of the car, it would not accelerate. It rolled to a stop on Peachtree Street, one of the busiest commercial highways in the city. “Well dang. I was afraid that would happen,” my sister proclaimed. “I guess when the gas needle is on the E-- empty-- sign, it really means it.” Suddenly my sister's version of adulthood was not looking so cool.

Luckily, we were on a busy highway, so the gas station was only three blocks away. We walked to the Citgo station, and the night suddenly turned less glamorous and free. Neither of us had much cash on us; Alice

was waiting for a paycheck, which is why she hadn't filled her tank. Between the two of us and the change in the floor of the car, we came up with a couple of bucks. We bought a glass bottle of Coca-Cola, which we quickly guzzled so we could fill it with unleaded gasoline-- totally illegal, but it fit nicely into my sister's gas tank and got us safely home. We both quickly agreed we wouldn't tell our dad about our misadventures. As for me, I have never since run out of gas... for my car.

*Have you ever run out of gas?* This time I do not mean with your car. I mean no gas, so you snap at your children when they try to get close to you. No gas, so you consider leaving your spouse. No gas, so you question whether the world will have hope for you. No gas, so you don't even bother to pray anymore. Have you ever run out of gas?

Unfortunately the gospel passage does not offer a lot of hope for running out of gas. The bridesmaids' fuel is oil-- not gas-- and who those don't have oil end up on the outside of a locked door at the wedding banquet that is to represent the kingdom of God. It sounds rather harsh, doesn't it?

These women are the bridesmaids awaiting the procession of the bridegroom. *He* is late. The women have gotten sleepy. It is not clear whether the groom has already met his bride and consummated the marriage, or whether he is heading to the bride's house, where the bridesmaids await, to meet his bride and continue the wedding feast. Traditional commentary teaches that the bridesmaids represent the church, and the bridegroom represents Jesus.

Matthew is the only one of the gospels that tells this particular parable. Matthew's Jesus relies on symbols that we have all seen-- who has not been to a wedding with bridesmaids? I imagine these women sitting around, waiting for the henna on their hands to dry, while their conversation explores the mysteries of sex and love.

In today's world of weddings, a bridesmaid is a loaded role that is often made fun of in movies like *Bridesmaids*-- we think of the expensive dress you will never wear again; the jealousy the other women place on their friend who gets married before them; the pageantry that may or may not support a lasting love. The changing of your single female friend into married partner whose life you must share with her interloping husband.

On the flip side, bridesmaids can also be a powerfully meaningful symbol and presence. The bridesmaids know the bride before she became a bride, presumably for a long time, and can help remind her of who she is. Bridesmaids are a celebration of friendship; we know we cannot get *all* we need from our spouses, so honoring the people who will help sustain the bride emotionally and socially marks an intention for the bride to keep nurturing those relationships in her life.

In the Matthew text, I keep hoping for an ironic flip to happen. Sure, 5 of the bridesmaids didn't bring enough oil. I feel for them: the groom is late-- so late, that all 10 of the bridesmaids fell asleep. Maybe if he had actually been on time, there would have been enough oil to keep those lamps lit until the banquet. This is one of the few parables of Jesus that focuses almost entirely on women, yet instead of being marked by their solidarity they are marked by their superiority: the women with oil favored above the women without oil. Why did the women with oil not share theirs and create their own kind of miracle of loaves and fishes? It is not fair-- after all, weddings are the one public event in first century Palestine where women would have really been able to shine. The groom would have already had his bris at circumcision, and then his *bar mitzah* at adolescence. And yet this groom comes late to meet the bridesmaids, and then won't even open the door to the bridesmaids who are only late because they ran out of oil because the groom *was so late*. If this is a metaphor for Jesus, where is the extravagant, promiscuous grace? I want Jesus to figure out the late-comers, the outsiders of the crowd, were actually the better party guests.

But instead of weighing so heavily on the judgment, consider reading this parable as more about encouragement for ***being ready*** to make important and even life-saving choices. Think about how different the stories would be for women today, if men who knew about sexual misconduct or assault would speak out, and hold abusers accountable when they saw it happen rather than stay complicit in their silence. Perhaps there would not be the need for all these revelations of assault coming out of places of power like Hollywood and Washington, because they never would have happened. Maybe then there would be more women in leadership in these places too. As for my own daughter, I certainly hope that if my child were ever vulnerable to harassment or assault, adults around her would be ready to address it and protect her. I hope they would not just *wonder* if she is ok, or *hope* that someone else speaks up, or worse, deny a problem may exist, but instead make an active choice that prepares her community for her safety. That responsibility begins with you and with me and extends to any adult who cares about the safety and well-being of children, youth and other vulnerable people.

God actually *calls* us to take a stand for the kind of community God wants to build here on earth. We have the opportunity to make a **choice in favor** of what God is doing. Joshua made an incredible speech to the Israelites before he died. He reminded them of the life God had already shown them, through establishing a people, leading them out of slavery when they were captives, and inscribing God's word on their hearts. Now God has brought them to a new land, and God fully recognizes the array of choices available to them: other gods, and other ways of life than the covenant God has made with them. "Choose *this* day whom you will serve;" Joshua insists, "As for me and my household, we shall serve the Lord."

That choice for serving the Lord provides the direction for any story that may come of their lives. It is a guiding star, an ordering of priorities.

Choosing now helps you to be ready later for God to be present in your story.

If I choose now to take a stand against racism, I will be ready later when a neighbor at a party makes a racist remark; instead of letting the comment slide in the spirit of politeness, I will call my neighbor into accountability and show them what being a good neighbor means in a multicultural town-- and I hope if the tables were turned, that a good neighbor would do the same for me.

If we join others in making a choice today for smarter gun legislation, this country will be ready tomorrow to literally save lives: it could prevent the next mass shooting, or a more common, everyday accident such as a 3 year old shooting and killing his 1 year old sister by accident, or a loved one who dies of suicide by gunshot, which is what took my uncle's life last summer.

Someone who chooses now to be an agent of God's love will be ready later when a friend admits they are running out of gas to say, "Let me pray with you," or "how about I bring over a meal so you can have a break?" or "Can I go with you to that AA meeting?"

Someone who chooses now to rediscover admiration and romance for their spouse is helped to be ready later when love and desire does not come as easily as it once did and neither of you feel as new and shiny as when you first discovered one another. And let me give you a hint: finding or rediscovering a love and admiration for *yourself* can be a first step in rekindling these feelings with your spouse.

Someone who chooses now to be sure there is a reserve of oil saved for when Jesus comes will be ready later to resist when other gods-- such as work, or money, or status-- press in on us and demand that we give them instead of God our last drops of oil.

To be honest, I know some of you show up at church and your lamp is completely out of oil. You have run out of gas and are on the side of the road. “I don’t know how I even pulled myself into this pew-- don’t you dare ask me to let my light shine!” And I would be lying if I were to say that I have never known that kind of emptiness.

It is a good thing this church has been stockpiling oil. You don’t need to run out to the market to buy oil from a vendor. It is right here, available to all who need it. It comes in the form of baptismal waters. It comes in the form of bread and wine. It comes in the love that is generously poured out on our children in the safe space we provide them. It comes in the mission we offer to the community, as we seek to feed the hungry and house the homeless, to welcome the foreigners as neighbors and we teach them the strange English language. It comes when we pray for one another, and when we stand before God admitting, “I am empty. Stalled at the side of the road. By the power of your Spirit, bring me your oil of gladness.”

Will you invest in this supply of oil, so that there is a steady supply? Your time invested in the ministries of the church make a choice today tell the good news of our faith today and every day. Your stewardship pledges make a choice today so the church can be ready tomorrow to offer oil to someone who needs it. Whether you can only offer as much as a glass Coca-Cola bottle can hold, or you can fill several lamps’ worth, your promises today can increase the light we all offer as we not only get ready and wait but also look for and find the banquet of God’s shalom.