



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **Burning Love**

Matthew 25:1-13

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Last Sunday I had a little trouble with my Time for Sharing. My tape just wouldn't hold my poster in place. Nina helpfully pointed me to the wedding emergency kit! There, I found pins, and the Time for Sharing was saved! Wedding emergency kits are important things, usually full of pins, band-aids, stain sticks, and Tylenol. For our wedding, we made little emergency kits for our women of honor who stood by our side. Sure enough, some of those things came in handy. Apparently, what was needed in a wedding emergency kit in the first century was not pins and Tylenol, but oil! And five of the bridesmaids in our parable failed to pack their emergency kit at all.

I wish that you could have seen the looks after this parable was read in our Wednesday Bible Study this week. Confusion was soon followed by a lot of questions, "Why won't the other bridesmaids share?" "Why was the bridegroom so late? Isn't this his fault?" "Why won't the late bridesmaids get to come inside? That seems rude!" Parables are never straightforward, and this one is particularly perplexing. We know very little about first century wedding practices. I don't know exactly what the bridesmaid role would be. The word used for the bridesmaids indicates they were probably young women, eligible for marriage. They may have been wedding guests, but it seems more likely that they were servants who waited for the bridegroom to arrive home after the ceremony. Some of them were prepared with plenty of oil in their lanterns so that if he was late, they could still light his path. Others failed to prepare, and when they had gone to get more oil, he arrived, and they were not there to do their jobs.

Of course, this is a parable. Parables are strange. The oil is not oil. The bridesmaids are not bridesmaids. The bridegroom is not a bridegroom. This is all supposed to represent something else.

This comes near the end of Matthew, a Gospel written long after folks anticipated the second coming of Christ would have already happened. People hearing this version of the good news needed hope and encouragement to keep going when everything in them may have wanted to give up. How do you live in the way of Jesus when everything around you is awful?

The people wanted a savior, not because they feared an afterlife of eternal damnation, but because the life they were living was *already* full of damnation. They lived under Roman occupation and were not truly free. They were economically exploited and lived with fear of the violent actions of the Roman government. A savior was needed to come and overthrow the Roman army. They needed a savior from occupation. Jesus had preached nonviolence, sharing resources, and loving enemies. He was executed by the very government from which he was supposed to save the people. The faithful audience of the Gospel of Matthew thought, "He didn't finish the job, but soon he will!" The second coming was about completing the act of ending the Roman Occupation. When was that going to happen? Matthew's original listeners had lived in the way of Jesus even after his death, and still it didn't seem like things were getting better. They were trying, but everything was awful and they were beginning to lose hope.

I don't need to tell you all the awful things happening in our world right now. There is no shortage of violence, hunger, greed, and pain. This being human thing is hard sometimes. This world is so cruel and violent and hateful sometimes. How do you hold on to hope when all seems hopeless? How do you keep those oil reserves full? This question of how you keep hope alive came up in Bible study and in book group this week. Here are a sampling of answers from your friends in faith at First United:

- Look to the beauty of art and nature
- Think about planting trees--the planter never sees them in their full glory, but plants anyway for the next generation
- Look to those who hope in the midst of difficulty, like the Venezuelans newly arrived to our community who made it here against all odds
- Just keep going
- Gather in community
- Remember God is with you

How do *you* continue to hope in the face of all evidence to the contrary? How do you bring yourself to keep replenishing your oil reserves when the dang groom never seems to show up?

You see, if you were to read all of Matthew, when you heard about these oil lamps in the parable, they would remind you that you had been told earlier in the book to let your light shine before others so that they will see your good works and give glory to God, and you would remember that a few chapters earlier you were told that you are the light of the world. You would also remember that like the bridegroom, Jesus doesn't show up anywhere on time because he is forever stopping to help, to heal, and to feed all along the way. So you would know that the oil in this parable is the good you do. It's your love burning brightly for all to

see. You would know that you are supposed to keep it burning, even though you're not always sure where Jesus is or why he's taking so long, and even though everything seems absolutely awful and hopeless.

Then, you would keep reading and you would find out that even though you feel like you're spinning your wheels and not doing anything good or useful and everything seems to be for naught, actually it's not. Because in just a few verses you'll hear Jesus say that you fed him when he was hungry and clothed him when he was naked and visited him when he was in prison, even though you don't remember doing that at all... because whatever you do the least of God's children, you do to Jesus himself.

So, if you were to read all that, chances are, you would gather some strength to keep going. You would keep loving your neighbor in spite of it all. You would start thinking maybe it is worth it to show up with extra oil and wait. You would keep making those donations and preparing food for the hungry and driving your neighbor to the doctor and making music and teaching children to be compassionate, and you would keep doing all of that even though it all feels so awful and hopeless sometimes, because you would know that regardless of how it may feel, your little lamp does matter. You need that oil. Because you are the light of the world.

Amen.