

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
November 6, 2011

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Matthew 25:1-13
"This little light of mine..."

Jesus begins the parable just read by Jim with the words: "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this." Yeah, right! It's a kingdom where people don't share with each other. Read literally it's a pretty harsh place.

Surely, the light of five lamps is enough for all 10 bridesmaids to get into the banquet hall and once inside they can continue to share. There must be some reason why each woman needed her own oil.

If this is the realm of God something else is being communicated in the story.

The ending is key: The gospel writer concludes, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." The story for the hearers of the day is about preparedness for the end of the age when Jesus comes to gather his people to himself. For us, it's about death: When our life on earth ends and how we prepare for a good death.

Psychologists by and large say that those who live the best die the best. The more integrated we are as human beings at the end of our lives the better will be our transition into the next life.

Our church member Gerry Scofield told me on more than one occasion that she was ready to meet the Lord. We spoke many times of life beyond death. She felt good about herself – and she should have because she was a lovely person – and thus it was easy for her to step from this world into the next. Klara Larsen is weakening in body but shines within with God's holy flame as she has all her life in her relationship with God in and through this church. She is ready and freely says that she wants to move on to her new life with God.

The parable is basically about individuals having enough oil to live full and meaningful lives and see them through from this world into God's eternal realm which is symbolized by the wedding banquet.

According to Atlanta pastor Lindsay Armstrong in the book *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p. 287) "the oil in this parable can be understood as faith, good works, practices, or spiritual reserves that remain constant and shine during good times as well as times of waiting for God. This explains why the bridesmaids cannot share their oil. Just as we cannot share spiritual reserves, development, or preparedness, the bridesmaids cannot borrow the resources needed. Being prepared to welcome Christ is an individual matter, regardless of whether he comes more quickly or more slowly than expected."

Armstrong and the parable are saying that while we gather as Christians to share love and resources for spiritual well being and growth in the end we stand alone, we go alone into death although it is comforting to have family members at our side when we go. We go with our own oil and light.

We are here to support each other in our spiritual well being and growth in Christ and we will always support and care for each other and in doing so our own spiritual life will be enhanced. This is oil that helps us to walk this life of faith, to engage meaningfully in our world and to enter boldly and joyfully into the life to come. "This little light of mine I'm gonna make it shine..." – now and forever.

Eternal flames burn throughout the world today to commemorate those who died in wars, those who fought in liberation struggles and for highly regarded presidents such as John F. Kennedy. They are lit by Jews to affirm the eternal word in the Torah and by Christians to remember the founding of the church with the flames of Pentecost. Our banner here recalls that flame.

Each Christian is a flame and the parable as stated encourages us to have abundant oil to keep our flames alive. There are many ways to keep that flame alive. Most books on spirituality nowadays serve this purpose. We can go a thousand ways to keep our flames alive or we can simply become a member of a spiritual community such as this church to receive sufficient oil. There is enough oil here and more for each of us.

We receive oil in worship. Every component of worship nurtures and nourishes us. Once a month, the first Sunday of the month, today, we also celebrate Holy Communion which is a wonderful way to affirm our growth in community.

We receive oil in our daily spiritual practices. Just this week a member of the church reminded me to remind you all to go to the "spirituality" link on our website for a whole host of ways that we can pray and meditate during the week. The page begins with the statement that the richness of our spiritual tradition is one of the church's best kept secrets. This member told me that this link on our website is also one our best kept secrets – "so tell everyone it is there."

In preparation for the Spirit & Work support group this week I reread the *lectio divina* outline for reading scripture and thought how wonderful this is. Please go to the outline on this link and read any passage from scripture using this approach and you will have enough oil to last you all the way to "kingdom come" and back.

More oil: The Spirit & Work support group that meets monthly in the library is a communal and conversational way for members in the workplace to speak about the joys and struggles of our lives at work and the connections between home and work, to consciously bring God into these spaces and to feel the support of others in the group. We pray for each other during the month.

This highlights the importance for times to reflect more deeply on our faith and sacred writings as the Tuesday morning Bible Study group does. They want it known that the

group is open to men and women. Our children receive excellent education each Sunday morning with Molly Rademacher and Faith McClellan. Faith, our intern is working on getting together with our youth for outings and reflections on those outings.

There are so many ways that we receive oil in the church: the voice and bell choirs, our times of fellowship, our mission endeavors and our ministry through the session, deacons and committees. Whenever we work in and through the church to further the mission and ministry of God in the world we are filling our flasks with oil.

We receive oil through engagements in daily life: In work, home, leisure and play. We receive oil when we are engaged in God's mission in the world. One of these ways for me this week was taking a few hours off work last Wednesday to join the General Strike in Oakland which was part of the "Occupy Oakland" gathering. I made up the hours by working on my day off – Friday.

I drove to the El Cerrito Plaza and rode the BART to downtown Oakland and was acutely aware of the irony of relying on BART workers to get me to a general strike. Many people *had* to work that day and many who could take time off were in Oakland.

I bumped into Rabbi Michael Learner there and asked him to give me a good reason for being there. He said you are representing the best of your biblical tradition in supporting the needs and hurts of many in society. A young person there told me that it was a place where the voices of all people were being heard. He was tired of top down decisions which mostly favored those on the top.

I felt the need to be in solidarity with the so-called 99% and it was a deeply profound spiritual experience just being there amid people praying and meditating, young people reading poetry, my conversations with a Rabbi and a theology professor at the Pacific School of Religion all desiring a better, more equitable and just USA and world. I returned to work for an evening meeting.

The latest *Unte Reader* magazine has an article of 25 visionaries who are changing our world. One of the visionaries is Quaker Parker J. Palmer who has established groups of people around the country who listen honestly and caringly to each other as they link their souls with their roles. I learned his method in my study leave last summer. Another visionary is John Warner, a green chemist, who is not afraid of the word "chemical" but he wants safe chemicals in our foods and environment. He founded the first PhD program in green chemistry at the University of Massachusetts. We fill our flasks with oil when we keep the vision of God's world alive.

We receive the oil we need in a myriad of ways. Joshua in the Hebrew text read today tells the people to "revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness." We can do no better than that to keep our eternal flame alive. Amen.