

**STORYTIME:
The One About Stocking Up
Before The Party**

Matthew 25:1-13

Be ready at any time to welcome the Christ!

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Weddings are always interesting occasions. There is the serious side of the worship service and the “solemn covenant” between two people as they join their lives together. There is the joy of seeing two people totally in love. And often there is comedy involved. Google “wedding fail,” and you will come up with scores of videos documenting things that went haywire in weddings.

Many of these wedding snafus involve flower girls or ringbearers who are too young for the job. I have seen them run back up the aisle, frightened by all the strangers who are looking at them. I have seen them run down the aisle and cling to a parent in the wedding party. There is no telling where a toddler let loose in the sanctuary might end up.

Unity candles provide much entertainment. My very first wedding, the individual candles were metal tubes with wax inserts with springs inside to keep the candle moving upward. After lighting the unity candle, the groom put his candle back in the holder. Unfortunately, the base had come unscrewed, and the candle launched into the air like a little rocket. Fortunately, the flame went out before it hit anything and caught the church on fire. I have seen candles ignite silk greenery; that provided a few moments of entertainment while we put the fire out.

Some of the wedding snafus come at the reception. My biggest fail lately was at the Sudbrink wedding in January. Janice did a lovely service for her son Sam and his bride McKenna. All I had to do was to announce the bride and groom at the reception. I asked everyone to welcome the new couple, Ben and McKenna Sudbrink. Ben is Sam’s brother and the best man, but not the groom. There was an audible intake of breath; Jeanne Starr vaulted up from her table nearby to say, “Sam, not Ben!” and I wanted the floor to open up and swallow me. It didn’t, and I apologized, and everyone laughed (at me) about it.

Weddings, even with the unexpected humor, are unforgettable events. In Jesus’ time, Jewish weddings were major community functions. Except for religious holidays, there was not much else to distract people from the everyday struggle for survival. So weddings were a big deal. Apart from the ceremony itself, there was a full week of parties and celebrations for the bride and groom. However, the bridegroom was on his own schedule, and

did not have to show up for the party at any particular time. In fact, it was sort of a game for the bridegroom to try to surprise the wedding guests with his arrival. To our contemporary ears, this parable may sound a bit contrived, but it is actually true to life for weddings in the 1st century.

Of course, Jesus wasn't just commenting on wedding customs. He was telling the story to make a point. The point makes sense in the context of the narrative. The 24th chapter of Matthew is often called the "Little Apocalypse." Apocalypse means revelation, like in the last book of the Bible, and Jesus reveals what is going to take place before the end of time. He and the disciples are in Jerusalem for the last week of Jesus' life, and they are admiring the beauty of the Temple. Jesus tells them that the Temple will be destroyed, so that not one stone will be left on another. A little later, sitting on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Temple and Jerusalem, he goes into a discourse about the end times. He tells the disciples about the false Messiahs who will arise, about the natural disasters that will precede the end, about the great suffering that will take place before the Son of Man returns in glory.

Then near the end of this discourse, Jesus says three important things: (1) This generation will not pass away before all these things happen. Of course, it didn't happen that way, but the expectation of the early church, if not Jesus himself, was that the end would come soon. (2) Nobody know exactly when these things will happen; "*about that day and hour, no one knows, neither the angels, nor the Son, but only the Father.*"¹ It will be a surprise. We're still waiting for it. (3) Be ready at any time for the Son of Man to return; "*Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*"²

Jesus then tells a story about a wise slave who works hard, not knowing when his master will come, and a wicked slave who blows off his responsibilities while the master is gone. When the master returns, he rewards the wise slave and punishes the wicked slave. So stay ready.

Now Jesus has set the context for our parable today. Maybe the disciples are starting to fade, so he throws in an element that will get their attention. What's more interesting than a wedding?

So the kingdom of heaven is like this. Ten bridesmaids—the Greek says “virgins,” but in the context of the wedding, these would be the attendants of the bride—were waiting on the groom to arrive. The party couldn’t start until he got there. Night was falling, so they had lamps lit. Five of the bridesmaids had thought to bring extra oil; five hadn’t. The groom was delayed, and everyone dozed off. Finally about midnight, there was a shout, “The bridegroom is coming!” The bridesmaids jumped up to prepare their lamps for a festive procession, but five of them had burned up all their oil. They asked the others to share, but the well-prepared bridesmaids sent them looking for an oil dealer at midnight to get more oil.

Meanwhile, the bridegroom came, went into the bride’s house, and the celebration began. The door was locked, to keep unwanted guests out. After a while, the five bridesmaids returned. Jesus doesn’t say if they found oil or not. But they had bigger problems; the door was locked. They called out to be let in, but the bridegroom came to the door. These girls were probably his wife’s friends from junior high, and he didn’t really know them. So they were left out of the party.

Jesus didn’t usually give a “moral of the story” with his parables, but he does with this one. He repeats what he had said just earlier, “*Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day or the hour.*”³ This is the point of the story. Like a good Boy Scout, whose motto is “Be Prepared,” we should also “Be Prepared.” This is true on several levels.

In the context of the Gospel, we should always be prepared for the apocalypse. The end of time may come upon us, and we need to be ready. We want to be like the wise slave who continued to be diligent and responsible while the master was away. He was rewarded when the master returned. Apparently the bridegroom has been delayed; Jesus did not come back in his own generation. But that doesn’t mean he’s not coming. Be prepared.

If we don’t see Jesus coming in the clouds in glory, we will meet our Master when we die. We will see Jesus face to face, and he will welcome us into the celebration of heaven. Or so we hope. But we have to be ready, and like the end of time, we don’t know the day or hour of our death.

If you want to guess when you might die, you can buy a watch that will count down the time you have left. It's called a Tikker watch, and it uses an algorithm similar to what the federal government uses to figure life expectancy. Except you wear it on your arm, a constant reminder of how much time (estimated) you have left. That might seem like sort of a morbid reminder of your mortality, but the inventor did not intend it that way at all. Fredrik Colting, from Sweden, a former gravedigger, invented the Tikker to help him focus on the positive. He said, "The occurrence of death is no surprise to anyone, but in our modern society we rarely talk about it. I think that if we were more aware of our own expiration I'm sure we'd make better choices while we are alive."⁴ He actually calls Tikker "the happiness watch," because knowing when your end might be helps you savor each moment you have.

We want to prepare our lives for the future, whether that is the end of time or our own end, but I think this parable has a much more present application. I believe we can meet the bridegroom—Christ—every day in the opportunities we have to be in ministry. When we care for our loved ones, when we reach out to strangers, whenever we meet another person in ministry, we are meeting Jesus and building up his Kingdom. So we need to be watching, waiting, prepared, because we do not know the day or the hour that Jesus will come to us in an opportunity to be his servant in the world. The point is to be ready every day.

Robby Robins was an Air Force pilot during the first Iraq war. Shortly after the war ended, he was unexpectedly given permission to immediately pull his crew together and fly his plane home. They flew across the ocean to Massachusetts and then had a long drive to western Pennsylvania, where Robby makes his home. They drove all night, and when his buddies dropped him off at his driveway just after sun-up, there was a big banner across the garage—"Welcome Home Dad!"

How did they know? He hadn't called; he doubted the Air Force had let them know. It had all happened so quickly. Robins said he walked into the house, and his kids were half-dressed for school. They screamed, "Daddy!" and ran to hug him. His wife came running down the hall—pretty dress, hair fixed, make-up on, looking great. "How did you know?" Robby asked.

Through her tears, she said, “I didn't. Once the war was over, we knew you'd be home one of these days. We knew you'd try to surprise us, so we've been ready every day.”⁵

If you're going to be prepared, if you're going to be ready every day to meet Jesus, like the wise bridesmaid, you're going to need extra oil. Not literal oil, but the oil of the spirit, the oil of discipleship, the oil that prepares you to be in the presence of the Bridegroom, the oil that gives you strength, peace, courage and hope. There are many ways to build up your reservoir of oil—prayer, Scripture, worship, sacraments, Christian conversation, acts of mercy—if that sounds like the means of grace, it is. It doesn't matter how you accumulate your reserves of spiritual oil, just that you do it, because you want to have it when you need it.

There's one character in this parable that is never named, but he is there in the background the whole time, and that is the oil merchant. He probably sold the oil to all the bridesmaids in the first place. Five of them bought plenty; five of them bought just enough to get by. I imagine he warned them, “You'd better get plenty. There's no telling how long the bridegroom will be.” Maybe they thought he was just trying to sell more oil. Maybe they thought he was just being an old worrywart. But they didn't buy any extra.

I know where the oil dealer is coming from. As Ellsworth Kalas says, we belong to the same trade association.⁶ As pastors, we spend our lives trying to sell people more oil, to help prepare them to meet the Bridegroom when he comes. We try to be merchants of light. We encourage people to build up their reservoir of faith, hope, love, and discipleship, because the day will come when they will need it, and if you're caught short in the critical time, you may miss the party.

So listen to the old oil merchant for just a minute more, and I will leave you with two thoughts. **First, you cannot buy oil in bulk.** You accumulate it little by little over time. Don't wait until the critical moment comes and you are faced with a deep need. You cannot just conjure up faith, hope, love, courage, strength at a moment's notice. It has to be built up, grown, reserved over time, so that it will be sufficient, more than adequate, when the time of need arrives.

And finally, hear this: **you can't burn someone else's oil.** That's what's behind the strange exchange between the wise and the foolish bridesmaids when the bridegroom finally comes. "Give us some of your extra!" the foolish ones cried. "Go get your own," the wise ones answered. If they're talking about oil, they're just being stingy. But if they're talking about faith—and they are—they are telling us a great truth. You can't burn someone else's oil. You can't rely on someone else's faith. You can't get by on somebody else's relationship with God. It has to be your own.

When my Dad died 30 years ago, I kept some of the mementoes that remind me of him. I have his small coin collection, his pocketknives, a few ties, and his glasses. Last year, we had a party that had an 80's theme, so I decided I would wear my Dad's glasses. I put them on, and I couldn't see a thing! I don't know what his vision problem was, but his prescription was very different from mine.

You can't see squat through somebody else's glasses, and you can't see God through somebody else's faith. Don't expect to get into the party because your Momma or your Daddy or your Grandma had faith. You can't burn someone else's oil. When the critical time comes, you have to get your own, and it's hard to find at midnight.

I have some oil to sell you today; it's my life's mission to make sure you have enough. Come to the Lord's Table, and build up your faith. Come to the Lord's Table, and make this faith your own. Come to the Lord's Table; the feast is prepared, and the Bridegroom is already here!

¹ Matthew 24:36.

² Matthew 24:42.

³ Matthew 25:13.

⁴ Lulu Miller, "Nothing Focuses the Mind Like the Ultimate Deadline: Death," NPR (12-31-13).

⁵ Lee Eclov, "Heaven," *PreachingToday.com*.

⁶ Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables From The Backside* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 105.