

“Bridesmaids” – Proper 27A
Reverend Jennifer Adams, 11/09/08

I have shared with some of you my experience in college where I was asked to leave a Bible study group. Now - I've used the language of "kicked out" in more dramatic tellings, but really it was more of a direct suggestion by the leader that maybe that group wasn't a good fit for me. The issue was that I was asking a whole lot of questions and they weren't. Now - I could have simply stopped asking, and frankly I can take some responsibility for not being at my community-building best in that group, getting some sort of inner satisfaction as I stirred things up. But, I did end up leaving that group searching for greener or at least more inquiring faith pastures and I'm telling you this story today because the straw that broke the Bible-study-camel's-back was actually this parable. The parable of the bridesmaids and the oil. This parable got so under my skin that I couldn't drop the question it raised for me.

You just heard it read: Here are these ten bridesmaids who took their lamps to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five of them were wise. When the foolish took their lamps they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with them along with their lamps. As the bridegroom got delayed all of the bridesmaids slept and then at midnight when he arrived there was a shout and the bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. Which is when the foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, because our lamps are going out." But the wise replied (and here's what pained me so,) "No." They said No! "There will not be enough for you and for us; you'd better go get some for yourselves." And at that point in the gospel of Matthew, I was devastated and the questions flowed.

I couldn't believe that they wouldn't share their oil. I was actually furious. As if we needed one more lesson in every man for himself and not just a lesson but a gospel lesson! How did this story ever get in here, I wondered? What about community? What about sacrifice? What about caring for the least of these my brothers and sisters with oil? And not only that but we'd finally gotten a parable where women were the main characters and they weren't sharing with each other either. So it was a double blow. And so I went on official record (my own inner official record, of course) as passionately and righteously disagreeing with this parable -- and that was the end of my college Christian Fellowship career.

But here's what's funny. I get it now. And they were right. There are some things we can't share with someone else, things we can't just borrow from another person and I think that's what this parable is about. There are some things that each of us has to discover for ourselves or come to for ourselves or claim for ourselves. There are things you can't do for me and things I can't do for you and that's what this parable is reminding us of. You who are parents probably know this best of all. Because parenting is full of moments when you'd like to take that lamp and fill it for your child forever – or keep refilling it whenever they spill it - fill it with faith and insight and confidence and good decision making skills and hope and perspective and friends. But eventually as a parent, you come to realize that your kids and youth and young adults need to know where to find that oil for themselves how to cultivate it and monitor their store of it. They need to know how to work the lamp and how to take responsibility for keeping it filled. And all of that is part of maturing in faith and in life. And it's not only in parent-child relationships we find this theme, it's among siblings and in friendships and marriages and on church commissions and in church choirs and on church vestries and probably in most areas that involve human beings relating with other human beings. The truth is that there are lines, not always clear ones (and ironically at this point in my life I'm actually craving a little more black and white in these areas) there are lines between what we can do for someone else and what they need to do for themselves.

And so I've come to describe this parable as "The one with the Wise Women . . . the remarkably healthy, non-co-dependent bridesmaids who refused to enable their sister bridesmaids any longer. The wise women who stopped sharing the oil that couldn't or shouldn't be shared and encouraged the others to go and find their own."

Which doesn't mean that I'm out of questions. It just means that the questions have changed. Now I ask what can I do, what can we do for each other when we bump up against these kinds of situations. And I think that there are few things we can do maybe you'll think of others too. First of all, we can make it as easy as we possibly can for that other person to get their own oil. We can give them room to search and encourage their process. We can offer directions, the sharing of our own stories of where we've found it. We can support and encourage one another to do the inner work that each of us needs to do in order to keep the

lamp burning. And this kind of support is the kind of support that over the long run allows for growth and understanding and self-differentiation. All good things.

Second and I think this is the hardest one, we can hold the line that the bridesmaids held, coming to understand when we shouldn't share our own oil, shouldn't pour out any more of it, for fear of running way too low ourselves or for getting in the way of another person learning how to get filled themselves. This is a challenge for us as a people who run low too much of the time. And I get it – the temptation is to pour our oil in lots and lots of lamps when really this parable says that it's incredibly important to tend to our own. And to trust that the light that comes from our lamp does contribute to something greater, something beyond ourselves and for ourselves all at the same time.

Finally, and here's the beauty we need to get to know the one from whom the oil comes. Because in all truth, there's an endless supply and it's always close by. And the one who is oil is also light, the light of the world. And that One wants nothing more than for our lamps to shine – to shine with joy, with peace with love for one another and with love for ourselves too. Amen.