

Kirby Lawrence Hill
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Matthew 25:1-13
November 8, 2020

Abington Presbyterian Church

THE OIL OF SERVICE

Waiting – we’ve known waiting – some of it is excruciating.

- A broad-ramification election night that lasted three and a half days.
- Vulnerable people who have been isolated or quarantined or who navigate each day and every contact carefully trying to protect the health of others and themselves for forty days and forty nights six times over and it continues.
- Graduates, who have not been able to celebrate their accomplishments or move on with the next steps in their lives.
- Unemployed or furloughed workers who wonder when the job market might open back up.
- Engaged couples, who had their weddings scheduled in past months, who postponed their celebrations and are wondering when they might be able to move forward.

All of us have gone through multiple kinds of waiting in past months. It’s not the easiest thing, particularly when what we are waiting for seems to be delayed when compared with our expectations.

Jesus told a parable about waiting and being equipped for it. In the teaching story, there are a group of people waiting where half are called wise while the other half are labeled as foolish. Ten in total are waiting for the groom to show up for a holy union and celebration, and their waiting goes much longer than they had expected, even late into the night. They had taken their oil lamps to demonstrate their welcome and to illumine the dark times. Those who were labeled as wise had taken a flask of oil with them to refill their lamps. Although they were tired, they were prepared when the delay came. Those who were labeled as foolish were the waiting folks who ran out of oil for their lamps. Right when they most needed their lamps

burning in the middle of the night to welcome the approach of the groom, their lights had gone out.

It is here that we have to exercise a bit of care with the parable, because those who are called wise tell their ill-prepared companions who ask to share their oil that they can't do so. It doesn't seem quite right to conclude that Jesus is teaching that it is wise not to share of one's resources with those in need. That leads to the question – what does the oil symbolize? Are there critical resources that can't be shared?

Our companion reading for today seems to help here. Joshua had been the primary leader for the Hebrew people after Moses had died. Moses had been the one who led them out of slavery in Egypt and had kept them together in the long period of time they were in the wilderness. Through him, the Hebrew people received the law which came as a gift from God to guide them. Moses had then led them to a mountaintop within sight of the Promised Land, but he didn't get to lead them into it. Joshua did that, crossing the Jordan River into the land God had promised them, leading a number of conquests and then a process of allotment of the land. But toward the end of his life, Joshua wants to share last words that he hoped would be lasting. The Hebrew people had come into a land where the people who had lived there previously worshiped a number of different gods in the form of idols. Joshua did not want those who had been liberated from slavery by the Lord to follow the cultural and spiritual practices that were around them. He called upon them to keep their faith in God, but then he said in essence, I can't make the faith choices for you. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord, but you are going to have to choose who you will serve. He did not say, "Choose in whom you will believe." He said, "Choose who you will serve." I can share my desire for you to be faithful, but I can't make your light of faith keep burning. You are going to have to make that choice about who you will be serving. The people respond that they intended to serve the Lord, but Joshua asks them repeatedly, because he knows that just giving lip service to something so important would not do.

So, returning to the imagery of the parable, what is the figurative flask of oil that we have to fill for ourselves that will keep our service of God burning brightly in a dark time of waiting? Oil in the biblical story is used in a variety of ways. There are

descriptions of the oil of gladness that comes with making manifest our unity, no matter our differences. There is the oil of anointing that can mark us for priestly service that prays for everyone and asks God to intercede in ways that bring repair and reconciliation. There is the oil of healing that eases the suffering of those left beaten and battered by the side of the road. There is the fragrant oil of burial that the women took to the tomb when they discovered it empty. There is the oil that consecrates spaces that remind us that we are on holy ground, in our place of worship, in our cyberspace, and on our streets. There is the expensive oil that we pour out on Jesus' feet in adoration and worship, knowing that the celebration of the unabashed love of God cannot go without marking it. There is also the oil of scripture that informs and encourages, shapes and guides us as we choose who we will serve. Somehow, by God's grace, when we use our oil in these ways, when we serve God in these ways, our reserve of oil is replenished.

We have to choose this day whether we will stock up on the oil of gladness and healing, the oil of consecration and anointing, because we still have some waiting to do. There still is going to be some of the dark of night ahead, and we have to recognize that the lights we are keeping burning are much more important than just event lighting. Others can model faithful service that may inspire us to keep filling our flasks with oil, but they cannot fill them for us. Each one of us has to figure out this day who we will serve. I encourage you to serve the Lord, but I can't make that choice for you. Fill your flask with the oil of worship, prayer, which leads to showing your love for God through loving your neighbor, giving of yourself to God and to others. That's how our flasks of oil stay filled and our lights keep burning during a long night of waiting. The One whose presence is the reason for celebration will come. May we be among those who by our actions during this time of waiting be deemed by our Lord as wise. Choose to serve the Lord once again this day and you will have oil to keep your light burning.