

*“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ 10And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ 12But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ 13Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”*

When I am having a friendly conversation and that conversation turns into complaining and lamenting how awful things are these days, I often burst into song. “It’s a hard knock life for us; it’s a hard knock life for us!” That is the only part of the song I know but it is enough. Life is tough – the orphans in the musical, Annie, knew that and sometimes so do we.

The other morning in the locker room at EMH I overheard some conversation about the Browns but before my mind could even go to the song from the musical, “Annie” from the far side of the room came a strong voice singing, “The sun will come out tomorrow.” Same musical – different message. I get to choose which song I sing and so do you.

Once Jesus told a parable that I wish he had not told. I like to stand before you and tell you that Jesus has you in his hands and he will not let go. Even if you should lose your grip on Jesus he will not lose his grip on you. But Jesus told the parable of the five wise and five foolish bridesmaids. They were all waiting for the bridegroom, they all had a reasonable amount of oil in their lamps – had the bridegroom arrived when he was expected they would have joined the procession into the wedding hall – lamps glowing to honor the bridegroom. But the bridegroom was delayed - they all slept. At midnight came the shout “Look, here is the bridegroom – come out to meet him.” As they adjusted the flames all of them realized that the lamps were almost empty. The wise bridesmaids had brought extra oil. The foolish had to run to the store to get some just at the crucial moment. The bridegroom came – the wise

bridesmaids accompanied him to the wedding hall and the door was shut. When the foolish came they cried, “Lord, Lord open to us.” The bridegroom replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.”

All along they thought they belonged to him. They were right with those who did – waiting for the bridegroom, sleeping when he was delayed, seeking to prepare the lamps at his arrival. But they did not have enough oil. And the door was shut.

Who are these foolish ones? We could have some fun this morning talking about “them.” Who should we pick on? The ones who did not come to church today? Or the ones who are not as committed as you and I are? Maybe they are the ones who store up their treasures here on earth rather than having their treasure in heaven. Maybe they are the ones who when they are struck on the cheek do not turn the other cheek but make a fist and strike back. Maybe they are the ones who curse their enemies rather than praying for them. Or maybe they are the ones who seek to take a speck out of their neighbor’s eye when they have a log in their own eye. Maybe the foolish ones are not them but are we. Maybe Jesus is not telling this parable about them but to us.

If this parable is spoken to you and to me –what does Jesus want us know – to do? What is that extra flask of oil?

I asked at the council meeting the other night – some said the oil is commitment. Others said it is love, others making God a priority, still others said it is wanting to do God’s will in a way that really leads to action. Luther said the oil is faith – others say it is a relationship with Jesus. And every one of these answers has me singing, “It’s a hard knock life for us.” For every one of these answers seems to put the burden on your shoulders and my shoulders.

I remember when the oil ran out for my father. All his life he had declared, “When I am right with God things just go well – God gives me guidance and inspiration as long as I believe.” But when my mom was in the Cleveland Clinic with a relapse of cancer and my father had undergone emergency surgery for a gangrenous gall bladder faith ran out – oil ran out – all hope was drained from him. Some of his fellow Gideons came to the house and read scripture to him – prayed with him. But his lamp burned very dimly for a while.

It can happen to any of us at any time. Whatever oil that we have can run out. Our world can come crashing down and what has sustained us all along may be lost to us.

Our Lord, on the cross cried out from that place, “My God, my God why have you abandoned me?” And in that moment there was no light from on high, no word of reassurance, just death. The door was shut.

The Bible teaches us that something changed in that moment. Jesus died abandoned by God so every one who believes in him never would be abandoned by God. God raised Jesus from the dead to begin the telling of this good news.

You will not be abandoned by God. In this moment the door to the wedding hall is wide open for you – no matter what you have done or failed to do the door is open right now. Love Jesus – love your neighbor – pray continually. As our congregation mission statement says, “Worship, learn, share.” Maybe you will not end up like my father, without faith, without hope.

But if you do end up like my father, trust that Jesus will hold onto you even if you can hold onto him no more. That is not what the parable says, but Jesus hanging onto me and you is the only certain hope that we can have. Amen.