

Give Me Oil in My Lamp

Psalm 78:1-7

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 25:1-13

November 9, 2014, Pent. 22A

I'm going to tell you a made-up story, except that it's true. It's a composite story that through the years has been reflected in various ways in the lives of many young people.

This story is about a young person named Bobbie—whether you picture a boy or a girl is up to you. Bobbie can be short for Robert or Roberta. Bobbie came from an inactive church family, and the minister was surprised when Bobbie showed up for membership class and was baptized. The pastor invited Bobbie to church camp the next summer, and Bobbie went, and had an absolutely wonderful week! Bobbie got a taste of what Christian community is all about, and loved it. Bobbie made new friends, learned more about the Bible, laughed, and prayed, and found the counselors, lay and minister alike, to be wonderful role models of the Christian faith. Bobbie loved the singing, and learned a new-old song, "Give me oil in my lamp, keep it burning, burning, burning, give me oil in my lamp, I pray." Bobbie was so excited about God, and Jesus, and the Church, and even started to wonder, "Could I be a minister some day?"

All good things come to an end, and Bobbie came home. What happened next? Here are two possible routes, among many. Route one: Bobbie's parents couldn't understand why Bobbie was so excited, and just figured it was a passing phase. Bobbie's friends laughed and mocked when Bobbie

tried to say how great camp was, and called him (or her) a Jesus freak and a major dweeb. At church the next Sunday, Bobbie heard people backbiting, gossiping, and criticizing. So eventually Bobbie became just another inactive church member, and the church camp week just a pleasant memory of something nice, but not very real after all. Route two: Bobbie's parents listened to Bobbie ramble on about camp, and encouraged their child. Friends from the youth group and adult advisors made sure that Bobbie had a way to get to all the youth group functions. Bobbie even got a group of kids together to sing some of the camp songs as special music during worship—"give me oil in my lamp, keep it burning." Church camp had been a crucial step in getting Bobbie to grow in faith, and Bobbie became a joyous Christian, an active church leader, and who knows? Maybe Bobbie even went to seminary. For sure, Bobbie gave a week each summer as a church camp counselor. The story of Bobbie is a parable for me, an example of how we are each invited to be disciples of Jesus, and how we each have to keep on deciding to be faithful. We each have to choose.

Back in the 24th chapter of Joshua, near the very end of the book, there's a fascinating story of how the elderly, war-worn Joshua gathered the people together at Shechem, and told them again the story of how God had been faithful to them in leading them out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into their Promised Land. But there were other peoples in that land, and the temptation was always there to worship their pagan gods. "Choose this day which God you will serve," Joshua challenged the crowd.

“But as for me and my household, we will choose the Lord.” Like Joshua, we each have to choose.

Paolo Solari wrote a poem that brings the choice to our day.

Choose, choose choose
To fight or run; To sleep or read
To study or play; To be faithful or promiscuous
To obey or rebel; To yield or resist
To create or destroy
To repent or deny
To forgive or resent
To save or to spend
To take risks or to be cautious
To dream, to trust
Who will I trust? Who will I serve? Who will I please?
The crowd, the fashion, the neighbors?
For what will I sacrifice?
Choose this day.... (unquote)

Our Gospel lesson is a parable Jesus told about a wedding. A wedding in those days was an enormous affair. It could last a week of partying, celebration, singing, drinking, and eating. At this wedding, the bridegroom was to come at night, and the bride sent ten of her best friends—bridesmaids, we could call them—to wait for him and to meet him, and to escort him back to town. Imagine a time without electricity, in the dark of night, when people would be watching the hillside, waiting to see that little trail of light from the oil lamps, the sign that the party would soon start. Five young women brought extra oil with them, but the other five assumed, “He wouldn’t be that late, would he?” and just took what oil their little lamps held. They waited,

and waited, and waited, and the foolish five became nervous as their lamps flickered and panicky as they extinguished. "Give me oil in my lamp," they asked their friends. "No, because then we may all be left in the dark." Finally the groom came and only five lights escorted him to the village, and the five foolish girls got left out.

When you've heard this story before, you may have assumed that the message was "be ready! Jesus is coming soon!" That's not quite it. The whole point, I think, was in the delay. The wise young women anticipated the delay and prepared for it. The point of the story, really, is "be faithful! Jesus is coming, sooner or later." Remember 3 years ago when one preacher got people excited, because according to his calculations he named the exact date of the Second Coming to be May 21, 2011? He was just one of many throughout the centuries to make such a prediction. There will always be people who will tell you that the end is near, that Jesus is coming soon, and they will point to this sign or to that sign, and try to scare you to death to accept the Lord on their terms before it's too late. But here's what Jesus said in Matthew 24:23: "If anyone tries to flag you down, calling out, 'Here's the Messiah!' or points, 'There he is!' don't fall for it." Then he said, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." To try and tie the mystery of God's will down to our own scheme, no matter how elaborate it may be and how many scripture verses can be manipulated it to make it sound good, it's second-guessing God. Christians have been waiting, off and

on, for nearly 2000 years now, for the second coming, and it may come tomorrow or it may come in another 2000 years. What the wise women waiting for the bridegroom knew was this—to be ready for the coming, but to be ready for the wait, as well.

“Give me oil in my lamp, keep it burning, keep it burning ‘til the break of day.” We need to have faith for the long haul; we need to find the resources—the oil for our lamps—to keep our faith sweet and strong. There will be dark times when we need the resources of faith—times of indifference or despair, times when God may seem distant and life may seem meaningless, times when we just want to give up. We may doubt that there’s enough oil in our lamps. But day will come, day will come.

What are these resources to get us through the night? Faith—deep trust in God and Jesus Christ, firm trust that God’s grace is real and that God loves us—that’s the beginning point. Hope—being willing to hang on through the dark and difficult times, knowing that God has something better in mind—that’s our flame of light in the darkness. And love—loving God wholeheartedly, above all else, and loving our neighbors as ourselves—that’s what the Christian life is all about.

What can we do to keep the oil of faith, hope and love, to keep our flames burning brightly in the dark? Attending church regularly helps keep us fueled; being fed at the Lord’s table; singing praise to God; listening for God’s word. Christian friends supporting and loving one another makes a big difference. Personal prayer and Bible study, at home, in groups, or here at church, helps us be aware of

God's presence. Acting out God's love in service to others, by working for justice and peace, brings us strength and satisfaction, too. All these help. But basically it comes down to this—be faithful to God, for God is faithful. God's faithfulness is the oil in our lamps. Amen.

By Michael Dixon