



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., *Rector*

## Do We Have Enough Oil?

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 8, 2020*

*The Twenty-third Sunday of Pentecost*

*Amos 5:18-24; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.*

*Take our lips and speak through them.*

*Take our hearts and see through them.*

*Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

What a week this has been! Say what you will, but 2020 does not disappoint when it comes to opportunities for either high drama or high anxiety. The presidential election (in the midst of a still-growing pandemic) had many of us glued to our television sets or computer screens this week while we awaited the news of the final outcome. Whatever else was revealed by this election, we are reminded we live in a nation with clear political diversity.

No news there. But how we will come together to face our nation's common challenges—or even if we can come together—are now the great questions before us. We've been divided before, and several political commentators remind us that this election reveals no greater degree of polarization than many previous presidential elections. Still, it *feels* as if we have been pulled farther apart in recent years, and there is a longing for finding places of agreement and good will.

*"The Kingdom of God will be like this," Jesus says at the beginning of a story he wants us to know. There are the foolish and there are the wise.*

The wise? Well, they're prepared. They've taken stock. They know precisely what they'll need. They have their extra flasks of oil. They know the bridegroom may take forever. They have the fuel to keep going and going and going. The foolish have done *almost* as well. They've shown up on time. They have the right wedding clothes. They remembered to bring their lamps. They have some oil. Give them a little credit.

Now, it is an understood custom that waiting is involved at a wedding in ancient Palestine. If the groom doesn't negotiate a settlement to be paid to the father of the bride, it shows a lack of respect for the bride's father and for the rest of the bride's family. And, if the bride's family doesn't negotiate in return, it shows a lack of respect for the groom. It would be as if to say, "He probably just doesn't have the resources to close this deal." Sometimes the bride's family elongates the pre-marital negotiations in order to express their deep reluctance to let their daughter leave home. "I just don't know if we can bear to let her go for that amount."

About a year-and-a-half ago, when we were on pilgrimage in the Holy Land with a group from St. Bart's, a vendor at a marketplace told my wife, "You have the most beautiful eyes. I would pay 65

chickens and two camels to marry you.” We suspect he had used this line before to great effect, and it did have us wondering if it was truly a complimentary offer. But his smile indicated it was not a serious one, although, as I recall, Ellen did end up buying lots of scarves from him.

So the wise and the foolish bridesmaids wait for the bridegroom together. And the bridegroom is delayed. And everyone falls asleep. And the lamps of the foolish bridesmaids go dark. And, when no one would share their oil, they went out in the dead of night looking for more fuel. And of course, that’s exactly when the bridegroom arrives. He offers no apologies for his lateness. From his point of view, it may have been a good, long negotiation that bodes well for his future relationship with his in-laws. And so those who were ready, go with him into the wedding banquet, and the door is shut.

And, later, when the other bridesmaids come saying, “Lord, lord, open to us,” the groom replies, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” In other words, “I don’t recognize you. You don’t look like my people. You’re not ready. You didn’t put your full selves into it. You didn’t go the extra mile to be ready.” In other words, “You took my love and my mercy and my forgiveness for granted.” “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” Dang. That’s harsh. But that is real, also.

Of course, you can’t take an allegory too literally. It’s a story intended to reveal a hidden meaning. But what is that meaning? Barbara Brown Taylor helps here by reminding us that, “Matthew’s stories are not about individuals. They are about communities of things: bunches of bridesmaids, fields of crops, flocks of animals, nets full of fish. The communities are always mixed and go on being mixed without much fanfare until the day someone comes to sort them out. Then the differences between them are revealed, so that some go on to glory while others go to the fire—or stand pounding on doors that will never ever open to them. The stories are not about single persons. They are always about groups of people who do not have forever to choose the way of life.”<sup>i</sup>

We do not have forever to choose a way of life, either. We are on the clock, and we must examine ourselves, our own community, our own church and ask if we have enough fuel to wait for a bridegroom, who is the Christ, and who is long, long delayed.

- Can we wait through a lingering pandemic?
- Can we make it through an economic crisis?
- Do we have the spiritual fuel to survive a racial reckoning?
- Can we wait through a time of deep political polarization?

Taylor notes, “Some make it to the party in time and some don’t. Some are wise and some are foolish, (Jesus) says at the beginning of the story, counting on us to stay tuned long enough to learn what sets the two groups apart. But you don’t have to wait long for the answer. Extra fuel sets the groups apart, Matthew says. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.”<sup>ii</sup>

There is fuel that we must protect. Be it our deep and abiding faith, or the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst, or our desire to live good and decent lives. Or even, as the prophet Amos reminds us, our passion for justice over our desire for tradition or right worship. “Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” In the parched desert of prejudice and inequality, with our tongues dry and cracking from the heat, imagine the refreshment of a justice that rolls down

like waters or the power of a righteousness that gushes like an ever flowing stream. This fuel must be protected. It is far too precious to be casually loaned, because it cannot be easily replaced.

I was licensed to the ministry in the Church of the Brethren when I was 16 years old. I was ordained in The Episcopal Church when I was 36. Taken together, I've given some 38 years of service in set-apart ministry to Christ and the Church. In all of those years, I've never faced a year more difficult than this one.

- Our parish is challenged economically by the loss of rental income which our congregation depends upon.
- Our parish is challenged emotionally by the on-going pandemic and the incalculable costs of not being able to gather together, or to embrace one another, or to even shake hands or hug one another.
- Our parish is challenged spiritually by being unable to worship in large numbers, unable to sing as a congregation, and by being unable to receive the Eucharist as we once did.

Nothing about this period of time has been easy. Yet I believe we have the fuel we need. We will need to remain vigilant. We will need to stay together. We cannot waste precious fuel in any of its forms. We cannot wander off on our own in the middle of the night looking for what won't help us. Perhaps this is not only an allegory for the Kingdom of Heaven, but this is also an allegory for life as a citizen of the United States.

Anthony Kronman, the former Dean of the Yale School of Law, wrote, "Our experiment in self-government is the most ambitious that human beings have ever undertaken. It is boisterous, contentious, divisive. To work at all, its citizens and leaders need to be able to see their opponents' views not as the diabolical expression of wholly malign forces, but as the beliefs of human beings whose ideas spring from commitments that even their enemies can partly acknowledge and perhaps even share. Our democracy needs what American jurist Learned Hand called the 'spirit of liberty' (which he) defined as 'the spirit that is not too sure it is right.' It is needed on both the right and the left."<sup>iii</sup>

Could we benefit from the spirit that is not too sure it is right? Perhaps. After all, humility is a holy virtue. Many a theologian has observed, "The minute you draw a clear line between who's in and who's out, you'll find Jesus on the other side." I believe it's one of the more aggravating things about trying to follow Christ.

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to encourage one another with words of assurance about the coming Kingdom. He wanted them to build up their fuel. He wanted them to know that, "We will be with the Lord forever." That is both the promise and the goal. The bridegroom *is* coming. He is just taking his quiet, sweet time.

*"The Kingdom of God will be like this," Jesus said at the beginning of a story he wants us to know. There are the foolish, and there are the wise.*

So, do you have enough oil for the journey? If not, how can you get more before it is too late? In my experience with driving a car, there are two ways you can run out of fuel, and I've had experience with each of them. First, you are simply clueless. You didn't look at the gauge and you don't have the slightest idea you are about to run out of gas. Surprise! Second, you are arrogant and you believe that you, unlike other mere mortals, will be able to coax an amazing number of miles out of what some might see as an empty gas tank. Congregations, I would suggest, are much the same. Some are clueless. Some are arrogant. We must take great care to be neither.

Let's take special care to preserve what is most precious to us in an unusual and challenging time so that we may continue to proclaim the Good News that, "We will be with the Lord forever." Let's continue to do the hard work that "lets justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Always A Guest: Speaking of Faith Far From Home*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, c. 2020, p. 222

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 223

<sup>iii</sup> *The Washington Post*, Opinion, "Hiding the Dark Parts of History on Campus is Bad for our Democracy," August 22, 2019, by Anthony Kronman, Sterling Professor of Law, Yale Law School

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For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission  
write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org)  
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022