

“DID YOU BRING ANY EXTRA OIL?”

I've been an ordained minister for almost thirty years now. In that time I've officiated at 132 weddings; and I can tell you from first-hand experience that it's always something of a miracle when a wedding starts on time.

During many of the weddings I've been a part of, there was a last minute flurry of frantic activity just before the ceremony was supposed to start.

“Who has the rings? What do you mean they're back at the hotel?”

“Where's the mother of the bride? She's supposed to be escorted to her seat now!”

“Does anyone know how to pin on these corsages and boutonnieres without drawing blood?”

“The bridal party is lining up for the procession, and the last time we saw the groom he was on the way to the bathroom!”

This wedding frenzy often continues even after the ceremony is over. The guests dutifully head off to the reception hall while the wedding party and family of the bride and groom become hostages of the photographer. I have to tell you in all honesty, I've come away from more than a few weddings with the strong impression that the whole affair was staged just so it could be put on film. I performed one wedding where the photographer literally stood in the center aisle of the church, held up her hand like a police officer directing traffic, and ordered each member of the bridal party to stop in their tracks as they were marching toward the altar so their picture could be taken!

After many of the wedding ceremonies I officiate at are over, I often wait around in the church for an hour or so while the photographer takes an infinite number of pictures. And as the radiant but exhausted newlyweds get photographed from every conceivable angle, with every imaginable combination of relatives and close friends standing next to them, the guests at the reception hall wait around, make small talk, stare at the uncut wedding cake and wonder if the bride and groom will ever arrive so the party can begin.

Some things never change!

2000 years ago, Jesus told a strikingly familiar story about a wedding. There were ten young women, all waiting anxiously for the groom to arrive at his wedding reception. There were no photographers back then, but obviously something was holding up the groom. The night grew long, and the lamps of the young maidens began to get low on oil.

Finally, in the early hours of the morning, the groom arrived; by which time five of the young women's lamps had gone out. Only those who had the foresight to bring extra oil with them were ready for the party to begin. But for the five bridesmaids whose lamps ran dry, the party was over.

This parable is obviously a story for the faithful about being prepared for Jesus' return; about having sufficient resources to withstand a long delay; and about being ready when the time finally comes and our Lord arrives.

Let me put this parable in historical perspective now so we can better understand it. At the time Matthew's Gospel was written, the early church was getting tired of waiting. The first few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection were a time of eager expectation.

Members of the Christian faith community thought the end of the age was coming soon. They expected Jesus to return within their lifetimes to usher in the final triumph of God and the establishment of God's rule over all creation; but their days of waiting turned into weeks; the weeks into months, and the months into years, and still the bridegroom hadn't arrived. The wait was much longer than had been expected; so, not surprisingly, the church began to doze off. It became apparent that more than one lamp full of oil was going to be needed before Christ the Bridegroom's return and God's glorious victory at the end of the age.

And that's still the case for us. So, did you bring any extra oil?

One can imagine what happened to the early Christians as they waited and waited for Jesus and he still didn't return. Their sense of expectation diminished and their excitement began to dwindle. And really, after so much time had gone by, how could it not?

When I was an elementary school student in the early 1960s, I vaguely remember having Civil Defense drills to show us what to do if the Russians ever decided to drop the atom bomb on us. We were taught to proceed, in an orderly fashion, of course, to the Civil Defense shelter in the school basement.

I know the goal and good intent was to give us a sense of security and safety, but even so, I had many a nightmare as a young kid about Russian planes flying over my house and dropping atomic bombs and my family being vaporized in a fiery explosion.

But by the 1970s and 1980s, even though the Soviet nuclear threat was still very real, no one was giving much thought to Civil Defense drills. The fact that nuclear war hadn't happened—we came close once or twice, but by the grace of God we managed to keep from blowing ourselves off the face of the planet—seemed to make us less concerned about the possibility of it occurring. As a nation, we came to think very little about nuclear war and prepared for it even less.

See how we dozed off and our concern faded?

I think that's sort of what happened to the early Christian church. I imagine that, after several decades of waiting for Jesus' expected return, the excitement and anticipation began to dwindle. The attention span and interest level of the charter members of the Christian church dropped off significantly.

About the time Matthew's Gospel was written, with its little story of the ten young maidens and the tardy groom, we can assume that a lot of Christians were saying, "The wait is getting tiresome. It's taking a lot longer than we thought for Jesus to return. So why should we bother thinking about it any longer? If something doesn't happen soon, I'm going to pull up stakes and move on with my life." In effect, their lamps were beginning to flicker and the flame of their faith was about ready to die out. Did any of them think to bring extra oil? That's what Jesus' parable we listened to this morning was asking them.

And, of course, the wait for Christ the bridegroom goes on today. Only now we're measuring the time that has gone by, not in decades but in centuries—twenty of them; or in millennia—two of them.

In all honesty, I'm pretty sure most of us don't give much if any thought to Christ's second coming these days. Even with the back and forth threats of nuclear annihilation going on between the United States and North Korea, the idea that human history as we know it is going to come to an end and Jesus will finally return to establish God's realm seems like a very strange notion to most people. It's difficult to wrap our minds around the thought, even in our wildest imaginings, that the world as we know it will come to an end.

Most of us have faith that the future belongs to God; and we might even believe that one day humankind's reign will come to an end and God's glorious realm will be established on earth as it is in heaven; but we don't believe that we'll be around to see it. That's because we live in the real world. This is the only world and the only existence we know—and we'd just as soon that things keep on going the way they've always gone, with life continuing as usual, and us making plans and arrangements as though human rule and human history will go on for the long term. I know I'm not going to give up my retirement accounts anytime soon!

So, being as the majority of us are probably figuring, as people of faith, that we will be following Jesus for some time to come, until our mortal lives end (hopefully) quite a few years from now, the question I've already asked several times becomes all the more important: Did you bring any extra oil?

It seems we're going to need a faith that will last; a faith that has permanence and stability to it. It seems that faith in Jesus and his promised return in glory is supposed to be sustained over the long-term; and as we prepare for it and keep ourselves ready for it, it inspires us to take a new direction in life and leads us toward different values, different ways of acting and treating one another, and a different understanding of ourselves and the world around us. But that begs the question, how enduring, how long-lasting will our faith and trust in Christ last? Will it last as long as necessary until the bridegroom finally returns?

One day a number of years ago, a parishioner of mine came to talk to me. She'd had what you would call a "mountain-top experience"—an intense, transformational encounter with the Lord. The Holy Spirit had set her on fire, and for months afterwards she was one of the most religious people you could ever know.

But one day his woman came to talk to me because she was concerned. The experience she'd had was gradually fading. It felt like she was losing her faith, and she desperately wanted to hold on to the intensity of the religious experience she'd had. I would compare the experience of that parishioner to being like a supernova. A supernova is basically a star that explodes. For a time it burns very brilliantly, with the energy of a million stars; but eventually it exhausts its supply of fuel, the brilliance fades and is gone, and the dead star ends up collapsing on itself. A supernova is impressive and dramatic, but it doesn't last.

Faith can be like that, explosive and fast-burning, but that's not the best kind of faith for the long-term while waiting for Christ the bridegroom to come.

So, did you bring any extra oil?

It's so easy to find ourselves unprepared in our faith. It's so easy to forget how long God might require us to wait for the final victory, when God's Kingdom is finally established. It's so easy to miscalculate what God may require of us as we live our lives waiting for Jesus our Savior to finally return. And as our lives go on, we can start to grow weary.

Human existence has a way of lulling us to sleep. Days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months, and months into years, until eventually we may begin to wonder, "Why am I waiting here? Why should I bother carrying any extra oil? The Bridegroom is never going to get here, so I'm never going to need it or

use it."

But then, just when we're beginning to nod off, we might find ourselves in the darkest hour of the night and need the lamp of our faith, full to the brim with oil, to illuminate our way. You see, there are days when we need faith, and there are days when we need Faith with a capital "F." There are days when the sun shines bright and we need no lamp and no oil at all; and moonlit evenings when just a small flicker of faith is enough to sustain us.

But there are other days and other nights that are much darker and gloomier, and we need a flame that's strong and steady, with lots of fuel to keep our lamps burning so it can penetrate the darkness we find ourselves in.

Did you or I bring any extra oil? Are we prepared for the long journey of life, with its ups and downs and sunrises and sunsets, as we wait for the Christ the bridegroom's arrival? Is ours a faith that will last and see us through the darkest hours of the night?

My friends, the Christian faith, and faithfulness, is a lifetime vocation. The events and circumstances of our lives may change as we go from one season to another; but one thing in life never changes—and that is, through all the events and circumstances we go through in our life, bright or gloomy, we're called to be faithful, patient, and trust that although it seems like the Lord is behind schedule, he promised he would come back to us, although it will be at a day and time we aren't aware of. Maybe it will even be at the hour of our death when Christ returns to us. So it's important for us to carry enough oil, and extra to spare, to see us through all the days, weeks, months and years of waiting for Christ's arrival.

In my years of ministry I've had the privilege and joy to have known some "extra oil" people: people who, when the night got long and the darkness grew deep, were able to keep their lamp burning. Most of them were people of quiet trust, whose faith burned slowly but brightly, and endured through even the hardest, most painful and daunting times. I've come to the conclusion that what those people have in common is, they know the source of their faith. They know where to go and what to do to refill their lamps when the oil starts to run low, the flame begins to flicker, and they feel their faith fade.

So let me ask one last time; do we have any extra oil for the wait ahead? Because who knows how long it will be before Christ the bridegroom arrives. And if we're going to be here awhile, we need to make sure we enough fuel to keep our lamps burning for however long it takes. Even if it's for the rest of our lives, until the hour of our deaths. Amen.