

Oil Crisis
1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, Matthew 25:1-13
November 9, 2008

About 12 days ago I received a video via email. It announced that the presidential election had been decided by merely one vote. By Friday after that Tuesday's election officials had determined the identity of the one foolish, lazy person who failed to cast the one vote that would have turned the election. It had been discovered that I had been the one who failed to cast a vote because I slept in as lazy bum and didn't make it to the polls! The video, of course, was an enticement to get out and vote, to not miss the opportunity to exercise your right as a citizen of the United States, for you did not want to be the one to blame if your candidate loses the election by your decisive vote!

Jesus' parable of the ten maidens reminds me of that video, for the parable encourages us to be prepared to participate in the wedding banquet, in the coming reign of God when it arrives in all its fullness. We want to be among those who have kept our lamps filled with oil so that we will have the opportunity to attend the celebration when it finally arrives.

It is helpful to have some background knowledge in interpreting this somewhat disturbing parable. The scripture passages in the closing weeks of the Christian year tend to be apocalyptic. The word means "to reveal" or "to uncover." The early Christians believed that Jesus would return in their lifetimes and "unveil" the Kingdom of God in all its fullness. With his ministry on earth in the first century he inaugurated the reign of God, but it had yet to arrive in all its fullness. Through his ministry and teaching he gave hints about the nature of that reign. Christians anxiously awaited its full arrival on earth as it is in heaven. The big question of the day was, "When will Christ return?" The answer was: no one knows, but there will be signs.

In the meantime, Christians had to figure out how to live until Jesus' return. Thus they asked, "What shall we do while we wait?" Matthew's parable about the bridesmaids helped them reflect on that question.

Apocalyptic literature and its worldview emerge in certain historical contexts such as persecution. It is not a genre of literature that is known well to us and is often difficult to understand because its message is often veiled in images and metaphor. The purpose of apocalyptic literature is to offer hope to persecuted people. Its basic message is, "You are suffering in this evil world because you are faithful. Remain faithful and you will be rewarded at the end." The reading from I Thessalonians concludes with the words, "Therefore encourage one another."

This is quite a contrast to prophetic literature in which the basic message is, "You are suffering because you are sinful. Repent and change your ways and your sufferings will end." For the most part, 21st century American Christians are not suffering either because of their sinfulness nor because of their faithfulness. However, we have been waiting 20 centuries longer than those first Christians for the reign of God to come in all its fullness. Thus, the question is still relevant for us today: "What shall we do while we wait for Jesus to return?"

A local priest and a pastor had that very question on their hearts as they were fishing on the side of the road. They thoughtfully made a sign saying, "The End is Near! Turn yourself around now before it's too late!" They showed the sign to each passing car.

One driver didn't appreciate the sign and shouted at them, "Leave us alone, you religious nuts!"

All of a sudden they heard a big splash, looked at each other, and the priest said to the pastor, "You think we should just put up a sign that says 'Bridge out' instead...."

How do we live our lives? The parable makes oil its central image, the essential ingredient for a season of waiting. What an interesting choice, for in so many cultures around the world, oil means life. It is a source of energy. It is a source of light. It is a source for cooking food. The absence of oil threatens life in multiple ways.

What does this oil represent – faith, good works, wisdom, attentiveness? Oil generates. Oil causes something to happen. It is fuel for light. It is a lubricant. Oil is power. Oil itself isn't good deeds, but it can be utilized to produce good deeds. Oil itself doesn't make the light, but it is the power that makes the light.

If God is the source and power behind any of our good deeds, then perhaps this oil has to do with our relationship with God. The oil is not certain belief systems or dogmas. Rather the oil represents the fullness, or lack thereof, of our relationship with God.

When our relationship with God is well cultivated and tended, the flame of our lamp will not go out. Our faith will fuel us through whatever dark days threaten to extinguish the light. When Jesus comes, we will be able to recognize his coming and seize the opportunity to experience God's grace and glory. Even in the face of disappointment we retain a glimmer of hope. But if our relationship with God is not kindled, any hope may be extinguished.

The expectation that Jesus' return was imminent was not fulfilled for Christians of the first century. Nearly two thousand years later we are still waiting. Our expectations have changed greatly since that time, and yet many of them remain unmet. It is difficult to remain faithful in the face of loss, suffering, and disappointment. Our despair can easily turn us into cynics. Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourners movement, says that "Cynics were realists who see the world as it is. At one time they may have had a glimmer of hope that change would take place. But they gave up trying to change the world and settled into cynicism. They are still against all the bad stuff, but they don't think it will ever change. Cynicism becomes a buffer against commitment. In contrast, hope is a decision, not a feeling. Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change."ⁱ

There is much in our world to discourage us and to turn us into cynics. Jesus is encouraging us to keep the oil of faith and hope burning so that the light of God will not burn out. We can grieve the losses in our lives and the world's losses to poverty, AIDS, malaria, civil strife, terrorism, and warfare. However, we grieve not as those without hope because God is our source of power.

This past week we have been reminded of many of those who kept the faith in spite of the suffering. Slaves sang spirituals to remind them that God's love was meant for them as well and that someday they would taste the sweetness of freedom. Frederick Douglass was a runaway slave who risked his life as an abolitionist until his freedom was purchased and Abraham Lincoln emancipated the slaves. The sad legacy of slavery evolved into racism, and yet there have been many who kept the oil of faith in God burning and fueling their mighty actions on behalf of civil rights for all people.

Rosa Parks was a seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama. Every day she rode the bus to work, and every day she rode the bus back home. She sat in the back of the bus, the only place African Americans in Alabama were allowed to ride. On December 1, 1955, she took a seat in the fifth row, the first row of the "Colored Section." When the bus driver asked her to give up her seat for a white passenger, she refused. More than her feet were tired. Parker Palmer says, "Rosa Parks sat down because she had reached a point where it was essential to embrace her true

vocation - not as someone who would reshape our society but as someone who would live out her full self in the world. She decided, 'I will no longer act on the outside in a way that contradicts the truth that I hold deeply on the inside. I will no longer act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be.'ⁱⁱⁱ

The white bus driver stopped the bus and ordered her to the back of the bus. She refused to move. He told her that he was about to call the police and that they would put her in jail. She replied, "That may be true." That was the external truth. She acted from the internal truth, from the wholeness of her being. With quiet fortitude she made a decision to hope, in spite of the evidence. More than a year later, on December 21, 1956, Montgomery's public transportation system was legally integrated. That day Rosa Parks rode the bus and shown in a famous press photo, seated in the row behind her unperturbed, is a white man. Throughout her 92 years of life until her death three years ago, Rosa Parks watched the evidence slowly and often painfully change.

Martin Luther King, Jr., devoted his life to making the evidence change, yet it was cut short before he saw the full fruits of his labor. Dr. Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse College, gave the eulogy at King's funeral. He said that Martin Luther King, Jr. had come preaching love and compassion and brotherhood rather than cynicism and violence. He said Martin Luther King, Jr. was a man who, as a Negro, had had every reason to hate America but who had loved her passionately instead and had sung her glory and promise more eloquently than anyone of his generation, maybe of any generation.ⁱⁱⁱ

The tears we witnessed streaming down the face of Jesse Jackson Tuesday evening as President-elect Obama spoke were tears of joy borne of much suffering and great hope. He was participating in an event that 50 or 40 years ago he and Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., could not dare imagine possible in their lifetimes. Because they and many others continued to keep the faith, to persevere in spite of oppression, we have witnessed an historical moment in our nation in which a man has not been "judged by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character." The work is not done; the change is not complete; racism has not been eliminated. We cannot lapse into complacency and acceptance of the status quo, for there are still many whose rights are being denied. In the face of other disappointments, we must not give in to cynicism and give up. "Hope is a decision; hope is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change."

Fueled by right relationship with the God of Jesus Christ, we can continue to hope for the day when every person on earth is able to embrace his or her full self, to be the whole person God envisions. Hope is the basis of Christian ethics, for we behave justly in anticipation of a just future. Let us take care to tend that precious relationship with God, that our lamps may never be extinguished and that our hope will never die. Let us actively wait with hope while reign of God continues to come on earth as it is in heaven.

ⁱ Jim Wallis, at Church of the Resurrection, Leawood, Kansas, Sept. 21, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ Rev. Bob Olmstead, "An American Story: Martin Luther King," January, 1985.