The Oil of Commitment
24 Pentecost; November 8, 2026
Saint John's Episcopal Church
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thess 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Our Gospel reading for this morning is another startling parable. The end of the Gospel of Matthew is full of them!

As we just heard, ten young women head out to meet the bridegroom of a wedding. The bridegroom is delayed, and, when he finally returns, five of them realize they have run out of oil. Their ungenerous companions refuse to share, so they dash off to purchase more while the wedding begins. But the unforgiving groom, who was himself tardy, refuses to let them join the wedding once it has begun.

My first impulse is to sympathize with the excluded women.

And, it is worth noting, Jesus' own sympathies would normally be with them, too. Jesus is usually all about sharing, unlike the wise virgins, and forgiveness, unlike the groom. So, we can be sure something odd is going on here.

The context makes it clear that our parable is about the coming of the kingdom of God. Immediately before our passage, Jesus describes the tribulations that will precede the Second Coming, and immediately afterwards he describes final judgment. That will be our reading in two weeks.

In between, we have three parables, of which this is the second, all with the same structure. The main man—the bridegroom in our parable—goes away and is gone an unexpectedly long time. But he does eventually come back for a reckoning with those who have been waiting for him—the women in our parable. And the question in each parable is, how did people behave while they were waiting? In our parable, did they have enough oil?

We can add a bit of historical context.

During his lifetime, Jesus' followers mostly assumed he was going to establish God's kingdom in all its power and glory. The crucifixion was an unwelcome surprise. But then Jesus rose again, renewing their hopes and

expectations. The last thing his disciples say to him before he ascends into heaven is, in effect, "when will you be back?" (Acts 1:6) Jesus didn't answer, but they thought his answer would have been, "soon."

We get a glimpse of Paul's assumption that Jesus would come back soon in our epistle. While talking about the Second Coming, he twice says, "we who are alive, who are left," as if he will still be alive when it happens.

But by the time Matthew writes his Gospel, Paul is dead. And it's clear that many Christians were beginning to wonder about the delay. Where was Jesus?

That's the situation addressed in our Gospel reading. Jesus has gone away, and been gone for an unexpectedly long time. But Jesus will come back eventually. And when Jesus comes back, he will want to know how we behaved in his absence. Did we have enough oil?

That is to say, the oil in our parable isn't really oil. It's something more like faith or love or, perhaps even better, perseverance.

Our Old Testament reading sheds additional light on what Jesus is getting at. It's another one of those compelling scenes that requires context.

A couple of weeks ago, we left Moses and his people on the very edge of the Promised Land. Poor Moses died there. After Moses' death, leadership passed to his assistant Joshua. Joshua led his people in a series of military campaigns that established their position in the Promised Land.

By the time of our reading, Joshua is near the end of his life. These are his final words to his community. And they are puzzling words.

Joshua asks his people if they want to follow God. The people assure him that they do. But Joshua isn't satisfied. Joshua warns them that a covenant with God is a serious commitment, and that they will be accountable for how well they honor it. The people hold firm—they want to worship the God who has brought them into the Promised Land.

What makes this story odd is the fact that Joshua's people have been following God faithfully for their whole lives. The book of Joshua

emphasizes how faithful they have been. So why is Joshua asking these longtime servants of the Lord if they want to continue to follow God?

I think of my marriage. Carrie and I were friends for five years before we started dating. We dated another couple of years before we got engaged. We weren't rushing into anything.

But before we married, we had premarital counselling with the woman who performed our ceremony. If I had to summarize her message to us, it was about what Joshua says to his people. She warned us, "Marriage can be hard. Know what you are getting into." That, despite the fact that our relationship was already well-established.

And marriage can be hard. A decade later, Carrie and I decided we should renew our vows. We met with a priest who asked us all the questions we had answered at our wedding years before. Would we continue to take each other as husband and wife, to have and to hold, for better and for worse, until death parts us? I am happy to say that we both agreed!

Our Old Testament reading is like premarital counselling, or maybe preparation for renewing wedding vows. Joshua tells his people, and us, that life with God can be hard. Are we prepared to commit, and to renew our commitment as needed?

That's the question Jesus' parable raises as well. How much oil do we have? Enough to keep us going through the years, which might get long?

That's the question we had just last Sunday, when we renewed our baptismal covenant. Are we prepared, yet again, to renounce evil and turn to our Lord?

But we don't only renew our commitments in such a formal way. Carrie and I only renewed our marriage vows that one time. In Church we renew our baptismal covenant at most a few times a year.

But in a different way, we face the same question about our supply of oil every day.

Most mornings I wake up before Carrie. I really enjoy reading in bed for a few minutes before I get up. But Carrie is sleeping next to me. Do I turn on

the light? Do I get up in a huff? Or do I remember that this is the woman I love and who has become one flesh with me.

Eventually I head downstairs to make myself breakfast. I don't love sharing the kitchen. I need freedom to move. And sometimes Carrie comes in, and I'm confronted with a slightly different version of the same questions I confronted in bed.

And so it goes through the day. Over and over again, I have the opportunity to respond to Carrie with impatience and judgment. And I have the opportunity to respond in love, which is an informal way of renewing my marriage vows in practice.

For better or for worse, those little moments, repeated over and over again, are what truly define a marriage.

The same is true in our relationship with God. Last week we formally renewed our baptismal vows. And then we had a week filled with opportunities to act in faith and love as we had committed, or not.

The oil in our parable is the constantly renewed commitment to live in love while we wait for Jesus to establish God's kingdom. That's not the kind of thing we can lend to others, or borrow from them. But it is the thing that, over time, shapes our lives and our characters.

I pray that God will renew our supply of oil so that we can become the people that God invites us to be, and can enjoy the festivities with our heavenly bridegroom. In Christ's name. Amen.