

Oil for Your Lamp

11/12/2023

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:
Matthew 25:1–13

I think we're a nice-Jesus kind of church. I know that I'm a nice-Jesus kind of preacher. I love those stories in the gospels when Jesus throws the doors open wide to everybody, when he heals, when he sits down and eats with the sinners and the tax collectors, when he forgives, when he teaches us to love everybody. That's *my* Jesus.

But you can't be nice all the time, can you? It doesn't work out. If you're always nice, if there's never a boundary, if there are never any consequences, eventually you're going to get taken advantage of, right? We all struggle with this. Parents! We want our kids to know that we'll always accept them for who they are no matter what and that we'll always love them. And most of us figure out that as the primary and unconditional source of love and acceptance in their lives, we are also in the best position to tell them, "NO! No way! No, you will not jump off the roof. Yes, you have to go to school."

And, in fact, if we don't do this for them, we'll do our kids a great disservice. We model for them what their own internal reasoning and morality should eventually look like—we help it to grow in the right

direction. That requires sunshine and water and fertilizer *and*, when things get really hairy, it requires the pruning shears.

So even a nice-Jesus preacher like me has got to take Jesus seriously when he says “mean stuff.” Just think about what happens with our kids: “No, you can’t have another cookie.” “You’re the meanest dada in the world! I don’t like you! I’m not gonna be your friend anymore!” Geez, kid, give me the benefit of the doubt. Could you just for a minute imagine that I still have your best interests at heart even though I’m saying NO? So, let’s give Jesus the benefit of the doubt this morning.

Remember, Christianity is not a religion of total acceptance. It’s a religion of total acceptance *and* radical transformation. When you hit rock bottom, it’s good to know that you’re accepted just as you are, but you don’t want to stay down there forever, do you? Accepted or not, it’s good to know that there’s a way back up. But sometimes the way back up begins with the door slamming shut in your face, right? That’s what rock bottom is. It doesn’t feel like a feast of acceptance. It’s a transformative coming up short. A radical and undeniable NO from the very depths of your being. And, sometimes, we need that.

When I was in my early twenties, I moved out to San Francisco. I moved out there to work in theater, because I loved theater, but also to run away from my calling to ministry, which I found very intimidating. And life got messy really quick because I was depressed, and anxious, and unfulfilled, and I didn’t know what to do about it, so I was doing everything I could do to avoid the fact that I was avoiding life. And when you’re behaving like this, bad things happen.

I had a wonderful girlfriend who I moved to California with. I messed that up royally by being totally emotionally unavailable. She ended our relationship rather spectacularly, which left me devastated and emotionally and physically homeless. I wasn’t taking care of my health. I was drinking and smoking and eating at Chili’s every single day. I became really bitter and angry. I started partying with my coworkers after work. And nobody parties better than theater folk! Anything to fill the spiritual hole inside of me.

One night after too much *fun*, I realized I had done too much damage to myself to even be able to drive down the street, let alone all the way home. So, I climbed into the back of my pickup truck, and I passed out. I was parked out in front of the bars, so I could hear everybody laughing at me as they walked home—pretty humiliating. At some point it started raining. I wake up in the morning sick and wet and it’s time for me to be back at work.

So, I drag myself inside the theater and I go in the bathroom and try to clean myself up. And I look in the mirror. And you can imagine what I must look like. And as I looked at that sin-sick, bedraggled reflection in the mirror, I heard a voice in my head, but a voice bubbling up from the deepest chamber of my heart. And it said to me, “I don’t even recognize you. Who are you? Truly, I tell you, I don’t know you.” Boom! Rock bottom. The door was slammed shut in my face. And thank God! Thank God!

Because that moment was the beginning of me turning it around.

I think one of the problems we run into here is that we think of Jesus as some judgmental guy up in heaven somewhere damning us to hell with the flick of his wrist for some very human mistake. But was the voice that I heard when I looked in that mirror an external, judgmental voice? No! No way! It was an internal, loving voice. The voice of someone who loves me so much, he was willing to say NO. He was willing to tell me the truth that I had been running away from.

Jesus is not just some guy up in heaven, right? He is also the Christ-child born within me, the *logos*, the Word which was in the beginning with God, the ordering principle of love through which everything which is made is made. If God is everywhere, then God is also within me and within you. We are never just damned from the outside. We're guided lovingly from within by a voice and power that is bigger than us.

Now, why did I hit rock bottom? Well, in part, it was because I was running on fumes. I had no gas in the tank. Or to use a more ancient metaphor: I had no oil in my lamp. I was a foolish young woman. And this is the other place where this story feels a little mean. When the foolish young women ask the wise young women if they can spare a little oil, the wise young women say NO. Now, this doesn't feel like a loving parent saying no. This feels more like sibling rivalry. It feels mean and stingy.

Doesn't God want us to share with others? Doesn't Jesus teach us to be generous and charitable with those in need? And who could be more in need at this moment than these young women with no oil so close to being swallowed by the darkness?

But this parable isn't about external social relations. This parable is about something inside of us. And so the metaphor kind of breaks down here. If I've mistreated myself and run out of gas and I'm about to break down, I can't just borrow \$20 bucks from someone to get a couple gallons to get me home. It doesn't work that way. Nobody else can give you oil from their lamp. It doesn't work. The oil you burn to be a true light to the world is an oil that must come from within. You can't get it from anybody else. You have to do the work yourself. It's your work. It's your life.

Now, there are lots of people who will promise you that they can give it to you. And whatever spiritual snake oil they sell you may even get the engine going for a little while, but ultimately, it's not going to work. The oil you burn to be a true light to the world must be your oil—oil you have made with your life. The wise can't give to you. The merchants can't sell it to you. It comes from God inside of you.

So even a nice-Jesus preacher like me has got to take Jesus seriously when he says "mean stuff." Because sometimes we need that voice of wisdom and discernment, guiding us from within, to set us back on the right path. If you have no oil in your lamp, if you have become acquainted with the rock at the very bottom of life, *you've* got to do the hard work of getting back on the right path. But if you are fortunate enough to have oil in your lamp, here's what Jesus might say to you, you wise young women:

Share your light generously. Allow it to spill over into the lives of others through acts of service, words of encouragement, shoulders to cry on. Let it light up the lives of others through generous giving to your church this stewardship season. Remember, next Sunday is Consecration Sunday, when we turn in our 2024 pledge cards for a blessing.

You can't give oil to anybody else. But you can burn your oil to make light for others. When someone else is down, and your light touches them in the darkness, and helps them to find their feet again, you've changed that life for the better. That's what a church is in a lot of ways. It's a place where the people with oil in their lamps make light for the people who are running on fumes. And when the time comes that we're on empty, we can trust that others will be there to help light the way home. And the brighter that light shines, the greater the impact of our ministries and our work together.

The oil in our lamps may come from within, but the light shines outwards, illuminating the world around us with compassion. So, let's tend the lamp within, trimming the wick, replenishing the oil, and together let's keep the lights on at Glen Ridge Congregational Church.