

86400 drops of Oil

a sermon by J. R. Luck Jr.

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So the gospel lesson today gives us 10 bridesmaids - 5 of them brought extra oil with them, 5 don't. Later that evening, the 5 maids without oil beg the others to spare some of theirs, but they will not and thus they are forced to go looking for more oil. Unfortunately, by the time they returned it was too late. The door was shut and locked. The maids plead and beg their Lord to let them in. He doesn't. He won't. And then we are told, this is like the Kingdom of God.

This is like the Kingdom of God? Okay Jim, can you please tell me how? I mean, where is God's generosity? Where's the emphasis on sharing? Where are God's blessings which overflow. Trust me, I hear you. But having said that, I'm fairly confident that this passage is not about generosity or abundance or sharing. I think it's about time and preparation.

Let me tell you about Harry. Harry was the first person we ever met at St. John's UCC in Richmond, Virginia. Jerry Moore was the pastor at the time and some of you may know Jerry as he used to pastor Second Reformed in Lexington and now lives in Winston-Salem. Anyway, Jerry used to say, "if only I could have a whole church full of Harry's. Indeed. Harry was the epitome of a southern gentleman full of kindness and hospitality. He befriended me and Mandy when we needed a friend and I don't know that I really ever told him thank-you.

Now I knew Harry had prostate cancer, but that disease can move so slowly, and besides... this was Harry. And Harry was always going to be there. The last time I talked to Harry was in August of 2004. We were going to go down to his place on Gwynn's Island at the mouth of the Rappahanock River and the Chesapeake Bay. He had granted us an open door policy and we had hoped he might join us for the day. He told us he couldn't come. He said that he had really been struggling and that he was now being assisted by home health care. Home health care? Harry needed home health care? I couldn't get my mind around it.

After I hung up the phone that Saturday afternoon, life happened. I had an interview with a search committee a week later, and then a month later I preached a trial sermon. The next two months were a whirlwind as we picked up our lives and moved from Virginia here to North Carolina. After arriving in the Hickory area, Mandy and I went to annual pot luck dinner for UCC ministers in that district. During that meal we started talking with one of the ministers about Virginia which led to a discussion about Richmond which led to a discussion about St. John's UCC. That's when I asked our host with great enthusiasm about Harry. He looked at me with great surprise and sadness. "Jim, Harry just died. His funeral was 3 days ago." I had run out of oil. I had always assumed there was plenty of oil, plenty of time; plenty of time to fish for flounder off his dock, plenty of time to savor his pecan pie, plenty of time to treasure this gem of a man.

Truth be told, there was far less time or oil than I thought. And if oil is a metaphor for time then nobody can share their time with me. This life of ours isn't like the current Justin Timberlake movie In Time where the rich can buy all the time they want. Nope. We get what we get. Now 5 bridesmaids knew that you never know when the the groom might come and the time might be. So they prepare ahead of time. But 5, well 5 assume that life would progress the way they wanted. No wonder the Bible calls them foolish.

This year the liturgical year ends on November 20. And as time runs out in our year our scripture lessons will concern themselves with time and the end of time.

Speaking of which, I don't know if you remember or not, but time was supposed to run out for us on October 21st. Harold Camping, remember? Back on May 21st Camping was the guy

that said the rapture was supposed to happen. And while the great disappearance was more of a great disappointment, Camping assured us that while he didn't know what happened to the rapture, he knew the end of time would be on October 21st. Guaranteed. That would have been 16 days ago. By the way and as a side note, you might find it interesting to know that Camping blamed God. God led him to the date of October 21st and God then changed his mind. Camping can't be held responsible for God changing his mind.

I just don't get it. I remember back in the 80's when Hal Lindsey was predicting the end of the world... I think it was in 1983. And there at the end of the 80's, long after 1983 he was still selling books. And the authors of the Left Behind series are no better. They are all obsessed with the day and time of the end even though St. Matthew couldn't be clearer: Don't.

As Jesus approaches his death, Jesus talks to his disciples about the end. The disciples are anxious as to when are these things going to take place. Jesus answers with a couple of parables. In one parable the master is unexpectedly early. Surprise, I'm back. In today's parable, the master or the bridegroom is unexpectedly late. Surprise: sorry it took so long. So Matthew essentially says, Harold my boy, stop concerning yourself with the when's. I might be early and I might be really, really late. Don't you worry about that though; that's my issue. Instead what you need to concern yourself with is how you wait. And Harold, you've wasted a lot of time to say nothing of money.

Scripture tells us that time is running out. Conservatives become apoplectic trying to figure out when. Liberals normally ignore the warnings that things won't always continue as they are or they approach this apocalyptic material metaphorically or symbolically. But even if you don't interpret this material about the end of time literally, literally we have but so much time on this earth and the deaths of individuals like Harry and Pug and Mel remind us of that gospel truth.

Last Monday at the cemetery I was talking to one of Mel's friends and we were trying to figure out the last time Mel preached. Between the two of us we thought we figured it out. But here's what interested me. During that last sermon, Mel told the congregation that we are all terminal, cancer or no cancer. So, since none of us are getting out of here alive, what are you going to do with your time?

The wise ones, like Mel, are aware that time is limited, and so they live and love with a certain amount of purposefulness. And then there are the foolish ones: I'm going to exercise when I get more time; I'm going to go see my children when I get more time; I'm going to be more involved with the church when I get more time. When I have the time there are a lot of things I'm going to do differently, but the assumption is that there will always be more time. It's a faulty assumption. This time right now is all we know we have and we don't know when it's going to end just like the bridesmaids didn't know when the groom might come.

And churches are no better than individuals; they assume that we have all the time in the world. There's no need to plan, no need to get some extra oil. We can always just go get more oil when we need it. Nope. Sorry. It doesn't work that way. Wise churches don't just float with the current and tides and wind and hope it will all work out. Oh it might for some, but for most.... I don't think so. Disney doesn't just hope that the customer will like their experience. They plan, they evaluate, they re-evaluate, they imagine, they re-imagine, and they don't assume anything. They don't assume people will have magical experiences at Disney World. They plan and design the experience to be magical.

I don't think wise churches are that different. They are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their vessel. With that in mind they think about where they want to be in 10 years time. They don't assume they will just float there. They set goals, a destination, a purpose, a mission. And they chart a course to reach that particular destination. They learn when to raise which sails at which time. When necessary they row. They adapt. They may even learn that they have to change their destination and goals. But they don't assume they have all the time; they

don't assume they will just happen to get the life and the church they want. They don't assume they will just happen to get the right pastor. They do the hard work so that they will be ready when the right pastor comes along.

I've read that the fastest growing churches only keep about 10% of the visitors that come. But they prepare for those 10%. They don't assume they will come and stay. They work to construct an experience so that they come and stay. They study, they evaluate, they plan, they imagine, they re-imagine, they act.

Folks Christ promises to be with us throughout life's voyages, but he doesn't promise us more time or that he's going to make it easy for us. He also doesn't tell us how to spend and use that time we are given. I happen to think that God sees us wake up each morning and says something like: Well... I wonder what she's going to do today?

So? How about it? You've got 86,400 opportunities today. As an individual what are you going to do with your time? As a church, as Peace UCC what will you do? Plan? Give up? Float with the tides and wind and see where you end up? Well whatever you do, choose well. Sooner or later the groom will come. Sooner or later we'll run out of time. What are you going to do with the time you've got right now? Amen.