



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“A CHARLESTON WEDDING”

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 25:1-13

*This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church, Charleston, SC, by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, November 9, 2008.*

There is something special about a Charleston wedding isn't there? People come from around the country to get married here or celebrate the wedding of a family member or friend. Residents make their vows in beautiful historic sanctuaries. One magazine writes,

Often lauded as the most romantic city in the country and ranked as one of the top spots for destination weddings, Charleston and its surrounding environs are the places for local and out-of-town couples to say 'I Do!' The reasons are obvious: Our miles of sandy beaches, shoreline of lush marshes, neighborhoods of secret courtyard gardens, plantations and parks shaded by oaks, and historic buildings swathed in piazzas have made courtship second nature here for centuries. And talk about perfect backdrops for saying your vows! With more than 100 churches downtown alone, it's no wonder the Holy City constantly rings with the cheery sounds of wedding bells.<sup>1</sup>

Well I have to admit that this description was written by the *Charleston Weddings Magazine*, a local publication that caters to those interested in getting married in this area. But there is something special about a Charleston wedding, isn't there? There is certainly excitement about being invited to a special ceremony in a special location or even being asked to participate in it. And even if you weren't married in Charleston or have not attended a wedding here, you still know how special weddings are. They are a time of celebration and joyful expression. Weddings are truly an important event in our culture and in our lives of faith.

And it is a wedding banquet that Jesus chooses to be the central event in a parable describing the kingdom of heaven. Jesus begins, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this." We have reached a very important part of Matthew's gospel. Just a chapter earlier, Jesus began his eschatological discourse. He predicted the destruction of the temple, shared the signs that would happen before his return, described persecutions, and encouraged his disciples to "keep watch." Just a chapter later, Jesus will be betrayed by Judas. Here, however, Jesus gives us a glimpse of the kingdom at his second coming.

It must be the wedding day – the excitement is in the air! Ten bridesmaids are waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom, who will take them to the wedding banquet. In first century culture, it is believed that the wedding festivities began at the bride's house and it was the groom's duty to arrive and escort the wedding party to the ceremony and reception. Five of these bridesmaids are wise and bring extra oil with their lamps. They know that the bridegroom may be delayed and want to be prepared if that is the case. Five are foolish and don't bring extra oil with their lamps; we certainly don't want to be like them! They all gather together and wait, and sure enough, the bridegroom is delayed. Maybe he and his father-in-law to be were haggling over the dowry; something that may

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<sup>1</sup> Charleston Weddings Media Kit, [<http://www.charlestonweddingsmag.com/WEDDINGSMEDIKIT.pdf>], November 7, 2008.

have been commonplace. Whatever the case, the wedding party gets tired and goes to sleep. Suddenly, however, there is a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” Immediately the bridesmaids get up and trim their lamps. They need the lamps to light the way to the banquet. Realizing that they do not have enough oil, the foolish bridesmaids ask the wise ones to share their extra oil. But the wise bridesmaids know there will not be enough oil to share. So the foolish bridesmaids go and buy oil from the dealers. While they are gone, the bridegroom comes and those who are ready go with him to the wedding banquet and the door is shut. I imagine the foolish bridesmaids are freaking out at this point. They purchase the oil only to return and realize that the wedding party has left. They scurry off to the banquet and say, “Lord, lord, open to us,” but the bridegroom replies, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” The door remains shut.

Jesus concludes his parable with the words, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” If we read this parable allegorically, we realize that Jesus is the bridegroom and we are the bridesmaids. The bridegroom is delayed in picking up the wedding party, just as Jesus is delayed in his second coming. And when Jesus does return, we realize that only some of us are prepared, and only some of us make it to the kingdom of heaven. This is a scary parable isn’t it? If this wouldn’t have been the gospel lectionary reading for this Sunday, I probably would not have picked it. What is it about this text that scares us so much? Is it the slamming of the door to the wedding banquet? Is it the words, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you”? Is it the realization that we don’t know the day or hour of Jesus’ return? Maybe it brings up experiences from our past.

One of my preaching professors at Columbia Theological Seminary, Anna Carter Florence, shared this story: “A man in Nashville told me that when he was in high school, his teacher took great pleasure in slamming the classroom door as soon as the bell rang, and then saying with relish to every late student who knocked at the door, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’”<sup>2</sup> This is certainly a frightening parable. Maybe it is the finality with which the end times are described.

It is no secret that we live finite lives here on earth. We all have a limited amount of time to respond to God’s call on our lives. It was just two weeks ago that Dr. Massie preached his *Autumn’s Admonition* sermon. He made it quite clear that we don’t know when our last chance will be to come to our senses about the important things in life, to come to those responsibilities and privileges that love is placing before us, and to come to our God. We never know which autumn will be our last.

Just this past week, Melinda Wilson, our Youth Ministry Intern, showed a short video on forgiveness at high school youth group. After previewing the video, which is part of the popular Nooma video series, we discussed whether or not to show it because of its poignant and sudden ending. At last, we decided to show it because its point rang true: we never know when we will have our last chance to forgive someone else. The video alternated between Rob Bell’s teaching and a woman collecting her luggage at an airport and going home. Her luggage was symbolic of the unforgiveness that she was carrying around. At the end of the video a truck slams into the side of her car as she exits the airport parking lot. The image was clear: we never know when we will have our last chance to forgive someone else.

We also don’t know when Jesus will return. Often people will try to interpret world events and dates and claim to know when Jesus will come again. But even Jesus said, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” And while some of the disturbing images in this parable tend to draw our attention and the sermon’s focus (the slamming of

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<sup>2</sup> Florence, Anna Carter, “Matthew 25:1-13” *Lectionary Homiletics*,  
[<http://www.goodpreacher.com/shareit/readreviews.php?cat=12>], November 7, 2008.

the door or the response of “Truly I tell you, I do not know you,”), instead let us hear Jesus’ call to examine the oil in our lamps, as we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ.

What is this oil? Martin Luther thought this oil might be faith. Others think the oil represents good works. I tend to agree with Brian Stoffregen of Faith Lutheran Church who suggests that this oil represents our relationship with God, who is the power and source of all our good deeds.<sup>3</sup> This oil is our spirituality and the power of God working through us. What can we learn about our oil?

First, we learn from the parable that all that matters is the amount of oil that we carry with us.<sup>4</sup> We have no way of knowing how much oil the wise and foolish bridesmaids have at home. Maybe the foolish ones had huge stockpiles back at the house and the wise ones were carrying their last flasks; we will never know. But what is important according to the parable is the amount of oil that the bridesmaids had with them; for that is all that they could use. When I was in high school, I once ran my car out of gas; I haven’t done that since! It didn’t matter that my family had gasoline at home sitting in our driveway. I was stuck out on the road because I didn’t have any gasoline with me.

Second we learn that there are kinds of oil that you can’t borrow from someone else.<sup>5</sup> The foolish bridesmaids realized this at the wrong time. You can borrow a friend’s car, but not the piece of mind that comes from always having an automobile in the driveway in case of an emergency. You can copy the answers off another person’s math homework, but this won’t help you correctly answer the problems on next week’s test. There are some things that you have to do yourself. On Confirmation Sunday each year youth state their faith in Jesus Christ in front of the church. While many have depended on the faith of their parents as they have grown and matured, at Confirmation their profession of faith is their own. There are some tasks that no one else can do for you.

As Christians, Jesus calls us to be “the light of the world.” We are called to let our light shine before others, so that our good works give praise to God. What are you doing to replenish your oil, so that your light will shine before others? Where are you finding God? For the time may come when you will run dry, and when that happens you won’t be a light for anybody, no matter how hard you try.

Are you filling up through personal devotional Bible reading? Are you studying the Bible in a group? Do you fill up through prayer or worship? Is the mission field where God fills your lamp? What about caring for our congregation? We each are filled in our own special way, and we have to replenish our oil somehow; it’s a non-negotiable. Don’t forget: the oil only matters if you can carry it with you. And only you can do the work of replenishing your oil.

Time and time again I am amazed how weeklong mission experiences seem to impact lives of faith. It was on a mission trip during high school, where God first filled my lamp. And regional and international mission trips are one way God continues to do so. There was one question I encouraged our youth to answer at the end of each of our mission trips this past summer: How are you going to take what you have experienced in Jamaica or Chattanooga, Tennessee and apply it to your daily life? The oil only matters if you can carry it with you.

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<sup>3</sup> Stoffregen, Brian, “Matthew 25:1-13” *CrossMarks Christian Resources*, [<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt25x1.htm>], November 7, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Florence, Anna Carter, “Matthew 25:1-13” *Lectionary Homiletics*, [<http://www.goodpreacher.com/shareit/readreviews.php?cat=12>], November 7, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Florence, Anna Carter, “Matthew 25:1-13” *Lectionary Homiletics*, [<http://www.goodpreacher.com/shareit/readreviews.php?cat=12>], November 7, 2008.

Why do we fill our lamps with oil? We don't fill our lamps because we are scared that God is going to slam the door shut on us. We don't fill them out of obligation or dread. We fill them because we can't wait to go with the bridegroom to the wedding banquet. We fill it because we have experienced a foretaste of the amazing celebration that is yet to begin for us: a celebration that God promises all his children; a celebration with which no Charleston wedding can even begin to compare.