This week’s text study left us with more questions than answers about the gospel reading. We wondered why five of the women were considered foolish when they started out with full lamps. We couldn’t figure out why the five with extra oil wouldn’t offer to share. We discussed how to make a story about ancient wedding rituals relevant to our congregations. In short, we felt like, in the words of Amos, we were fleeing from a lion and being met by a bear. Our three main questions were: what is the difference between the wise and the foolish, isn’t selfishness rewarded in this parable, and what does the oil in the story stand for?

All of the young women in the story have been chosen to be a part of the wedding party. The word “bridesmaids” is misleading; they are probably cousins or nieces of the bride or groom who are waiting for the couple to return from agreeing on a bride price and begin a celebration that might last a week or longer. They all arrive on time with full lamps; they all fall asleep while they are waiting. I can’t help but wonder if they are like me in that their preparedness varies from situation to situation. Most people that I know are a combination of wisdom and foolishness; is Jesus telling us that we need to step up our games or that we need to do a better job of focusing on what is truly important? I wonder if the five women were foolish because they went off to buy oil instead of waiting in the dark or standing in the light cast by the lamps of the wise women. Do you think that the groom, if he is supposed to represent Jesus, would have slammed the door in their faces? Maybe the moral of the story is that we need to stop being distracted by the chaos and busyness of everyday life; we need to stop rushing from place to place and take the time to build and nurture relationships with each other and with God. That might help answer the remaining two questions as well. Maybe the wise women didn’t share because the oil represents something that cannot be borrowed or acquired at the last minute. We know that it is something that is constantly being used up and needs to be replenished regularly. Maybe the wise women couldn’t share with the foolish women because the oil belonged to God and not to them.

Now that I have worked through the questions, all that remains is to extract a lesson from this parable. In my research, I came across something from Father John Cavanaugh that stopped me in my tracks:

“How are we asleep? All of us know how difficult it is for us to be inside the present moment, to not be asleep to the real riches inside our own lives. The distractions and worries of daily life tend to so consume us that we habitually take for granted what’s most precious to us, our health, the miracle of our senses, the love and friendships that surround us, and the gift of life itself. We go through our daily lives not only with a lack of reflectiveness and lack of gratitude but with a habitual touch of resentment as well, a chronic, grey depression, Robert Moore calls it. We are very much asleep, both to God and to our own lives.”

The oil in our lamps is our personal relationship with God. Although others can pray for and with us, they cannot give us this relationship. God is unwavering in his part of the relationship, but we must be replenished through regular prayer. Notice that the parable only deals with people who have access to both lamps and oil -- those who have been introduced to the possibility of a relationship with God. According to this parable, some will be waiting for the return with their lamps brightly lit, some in the dark, and some will scurry away. AMEN