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Running On Empty

Matthew 25: 1-13

For a year I lived in a small town out in the Texas hill country. I was in Kerrville, Texas, for my seminary internship. In this small town I got to live on my own for the first time and this was lots of fun. I got to develop habits of my own, with no interference from parents or teachers. Strangely, one habit I developed over that year was a penchant for driving my car until it was almost out of gas. By this I do not mean letting it go to under a ¼ tank! No, I liked to drive it until it would sputter to a halt at stop signs and I'd wonder if it would start again long enough to roll into the gas station three blocks away. More than once I entered a gas station in neutral. I did mention that it was a strange new habit, right? It's not as if I didn't want to go the places I planned on going, it was more that I was in control now and those plans were going to happen how I wanted, even down to rolling into the station on fumes.

For a procrastinator like me this wedding parable in Matthew is not easy news. Those who are prepared and prudent have more than enough oil and so are invited to be with the arriving bridegroom while the procrastinators who put off getting extra oil miss the bridegroom's big entrance, are called fools, and are barred from the wedding banquet. It's not that both sets of bridesmaids weren't ready, both were dressed and waiting, it's that only one set was prepared while the foolish ones had thought they could roll into the banquet on fumes.

Ever since that year in Kerrville I have never run my car on empty as I did then. I still like to let it go pretty low but nothing like before. When I consider the reason for this I can come up with only one: I don't run on empty anymore because I have made promises that I need to keep. In Texas my commitments were few, my time basically my own. I could pretty much just live for myself. In the years since I have commitments that are more important than the freedom I felt in running down the tank. By promises or commitments I, of course, mean children. No one wants to end up stranded on the side of the road with two young children! Also, they did not choose to sit on the side of that road and, by having a family I made a promise to them and their wellbeing trumps my quirks. I also mean all kinds of other things as well. My family but also my work here with all of you is a promise that I keep. My promises to friend relationships and causes I care about, all of these things represent promises I've made that can only be kept by keeping my tank full. You have made these promises too. You no longer live for just yourself.

In our passage today scholars have argued for centuries about what the extra oil represents. Some have said it was an extra measure of faith that the wise bridesmaids had while many have said it was a stockpile of good deeds that the wise bridesmaids carried with them. Both are important and either could be true for we all know the terrible consequences of having the right confession but not the corresponding life to go with it. But I believe the oil in this passage is actually something else. I believe it represents the promises we have made and kept in our life of faith. Many, many people have what are often called "mountaintop" experiences, so called because they really do often happen on top of a mountain or across an ocean or in some other extreme moment. During these experiences we feel God's presence so clearly and we know Christ's love so thoroughly that we are overwhelmed. We

make promises then and there to follow Christ and to love God and to serve others. It is powerful, like that first blush of love. When we leave the mountain many slowly forget the promises and, over time without even realizing it, they begin running on nothing but the fumes of that experience.

Having oil for our lamps, and extra oil at that, does not mean we have made promises to God, it means we have kept those promises over time; the promises to follow, love, serve, and we cannot keep those on an empty tank. If this wedding passage teaches us nothing else it is that this life of faith we strive to live is not a sprint, it is a marathon. It will need tanks and tanks and tanks of gas.

Ironically enough, the best metaphor for how we keep our stock of oil filled is that this relationship with God is like a long marriage, not a weekend fling. We keep filled up the same way we keep any marriage or long term relationship filled up. Here are three of the most important ways. We must communicate with God. It sounds silly and simple but what marriage or friendship will last if the two parties only speak for 90 seconds before they fall to sleep and then it is only to list off their needs for the next day! To be in a long term relationship we must let God into our lives and share even the smallest and most ordinary moments together. Secondly, we must communicate with others about our relationship with God. Again, this might sound strange but we have all known relationships that our doomed because those closest to the couple don't see any love between them. If others don't see your love for one another they can begin to question your relationship rather than help build it up and any relationship that is going to last needs the encouragement and guidance of others. Lastly, we must share our dreams with God and grow together. No relationship lasts if we don't know what hopes the other has, what dreams they have for their lives, and the ways they are growing. God longs to make our life dreams a reality and we can share those so that we grow together, rather than waking up one morning and realizing we've grown completely apart. As in any long relationship, these are important building blocks to, not just a first crush but an enduring love. In our relationship with God they can help give us full lamps with oil to spare.

So use this time to fill up a little for you have made promises that now need to be kept. At last week's baptism and at every baptism you promise to help raise our children in the faith. That cannot happen if you're running on empty. During our communion today you promise to remember the bridegroom, to celebrate him, to follow him until he comes again. That promise is empty if your lamp is empty.

For we no longer live only for ourselves. We have promised to raise the next generation. We have vowed to follow Jesus. We have said we love God. So take and eat; take and drink; add to your oil. And may these promises you've made not simply be that first blush of love but become enduring love until you are full to the brim. Amen.