

Worship 20.11.08

Mary Oliver: When I am among the Trees

*When I am among the trees,  
especially the willows and the honey locust, equally the beech, the oaks and the  
pines,  
they give off such hints of gladness.  
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.  
I am so distant from the hope of myself,  
in which I have goodness, and discernment, and never hurry through the world  
but walk slowly, and bow often. Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
and call out, "Stay awhile."  
The light flows from their branches.  
And they call again, "It's simple," they say, "and you too have come  
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine."*

Matthew 25: 1-13

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later

the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Mosses Video text:

While our landscape is turning from orange, yellow, and red to shades of gray, in November, the oaks in the Willamette Valley of Oregon are beginning to turn green. It's not that the trees are leafing out, but that the mosses come alive this time of year. Winter typically means rain in that part of the world, and rain is life.

In her book *Gathering Moss*<sup>1</sup>, author Robin Wall Kimmerer describes how the steady winter rains keep the tree trunks lush and green with moss. This mossy sponge drips a constant flow of water to the tree roots, saturating the ground below and filling the soil reservoir for the summer ahead. This steady, slow drip allows the trees to store the water they need; for drought will come.

By August, The moss carpets are shriveled, wiry skeletons, barely recognizable. Waiting.

Waiting for life to come.

You see, mosses must be awash in moisture in order for photosynthesis, or growth, to occur. A thin film of water over the moss leaf is the gateway for carbon dioxide to enter the leaf. Without water a dry moss is incapable of growth. Lacking roots, mosses are at the mercy of rainfall.

The bark of these Oregon oaks are shaggy with *Dendroalsia abietina* all year round. The name *Dendroalsia* translates from scientific Latin to something like "Companion of Trees". Like others of its kind, they tolerate wide swings in moisture. *Dendroalsia*'s life is tied to the comings and goings of water.

When moisture is plentiful, the moss soaks up the water and grows prolifically. But when the air dries, the moss dries with it.

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<sup>1</sup> Wall Kimmerer, Robin. 2003. *Gathering Moss: A Natural and cultural history of Mosses*. Oregon State University Press. Pp 35-44.

Such dramatic drying would be fatal to plants with roots. But most mosses are immune to death by drying. Mosses may lose up to 98% of their moisture, and still persevere until water returns. Even after 40 years of dehydration in a specimen cabinet, mosses have been fully revived after a dunk in a Petri dish. Kimmerer writes: They give me faith.

This tolerance to dryness comes at the cost of growth being limited to brief windows of time, when the moss is both wet and has sunlight for photosynthesis to occur. And yet, when the inevitable drought arrives, they are beautifully equipped for endurance.

You see, moss isn't helpless. Moss plants almost never occur singly, a dense turf of a drought-tolerant moss may exceed 300 stems per square inch. Separated from the rest of a clump, an individual moss shoot dries immediately. Together, they are resilient.

Water has a strong attraction for the small spaces in a clump of moss. With leaves that are only 1 cell thick, raindrops soak into the moss immediately, allowing them to work as a community to collect and hold onto the rain.

Yet despite all these remarkable tactics for water retention, the sun always returns and the moss begins to dry.

But

Mosses know what it is to wait. Not just to wait, but to wait in community. Otherwise they die. They rely on one another to thrive, working together through the interweaving of shoots and branches, standing together to create a place for water. For water is life, sustaining not just the one, but the all.

## SERMON:

As we begin, hold onto those images of moss, of their ability to wait, of relying on a community to thrive and survive, as we unpack this complicated parable of the 10 bridesmaids.

This week, where the divisions in our country have been exposed in full view, one wonders how we can live with the other in a community that thrives...together.

As humans, our greatest fear, evolutionarily - that fear that lies deep in the bones of each of us, is that we will be rejected or abandoned by our clan. It's hardwired into us. We need community to survive - to eat, to fend off the beasts that surround us, to raise our children. Fear of rejection and abandonment continue to live in each one of us. On some level, we know we cannot live without one another.

And so, in this week of exposing our deep rejections of 'the other'  
I've found myself asking a few questions about all of us:

What do you fear?

Where do you find security?

My guess is that deep down, we all fear the same things, but sometimes those fears get expressed as polar opposites, and so what one group names as a place of security is what the other group fears. Guns? A major source of fear, or something that brings a sense of security?

It seems almost impossible to imagine that we humans, we Americans, all want the same thing - a place to love and thrive, to feel like we belong - not rejected and abandoned, but welcomed to join the feast.

I want to name that this is a complicated and disturbing parable, and doesn't fit the pastoral Jesus who tells us to share our resources, look out for the needy. It doesn't fit our understanding of the door being opened to those who knock. Parables are stories that have many layers, they are stories created to leave us unsettled, urging us to think

in new ways about our understanding of God's world. Again and again, throughout the gospels, Jesus' unifying message is one of radical hospitality - sharing with the least of these - the marginalized, the unprepared, the foolish.

And so today I draw on the work of pastor and writer David Henson<sup>2</sup> to help us unpack this story from a different perspective.

We're told the bridegroom is late, much later than expected, and all the bridesmaids, ALL of them fell asleep. And as they slept, all let their wicks burn unevenly, untrimmed. When they awoke to the sound of the bridegroom's voice, they got up and got busy. Ah, but some remembered to bring the extra oil in case the wait was long, and some had forgotten. Sounds like an honest mistake.

***Henson suggests that this story is not about Jesus' rejecting those who forgot to pack the extra resources.*** Jesus is not simply telling us to be like the well prepared girl or boy scout, prepared for anything.

It's instructive to remember that Matthew was a book written shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem at a time when Jewish institutional leaders were scared, facing the possibility of their religion, their way of life, being totally wiped out. It's out of that very real possibility that they were clamping down on rebellious and heretical strands of Judaism, including the Jesus movement. Those Jewish leaders were drawing lines of who was in and who was out. Rejection was a part of their survival strategy. And so, in some ways, this is a story about real life, about religious leaders who literally shut the doors of the synagogue to the Jesus movement.

Henson focuses his looking for hidden nuggets of understanding in this parable around the response of the bridesmaids - for they were all invited, all eagerly waiting to enter the celebration with the bridegroom.

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<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2014/11/the-breaking-of-the-bridesmaids-how-scripture-und-ermines-a-parable/>

All wanted to celebrate. All were invited. Waiting. For those who weren't prepared, who didn't pack the extra oil - what would have happened, as their resources ran low, had the bridesmaids simply continued to wait, with sputtering lamps and dwindling lights?

What would have happened had the bridesmaids simply waited in the darkness of the night, lamps burned out? Waiting, waiting, knowing that they were part of a community that knows how to wait, even in dark times. Waiting in the darkness for the light of the bridegroom to appear?

This is the pivotal moment in the story, and maybe what Jesus was pointing us toward. It was in the leaving, choosing not to wait in the dark, not staying in that uncomfortable place of having no light of their own, unknowing, relying on the light of others, maybe it's here where the unprepared made their mistake.

*They left, when they should have stayed.* For surely, the bridal couple would have welcomed their friends into the light of the banquet, unconcerned about the state of their oil lamps, happy just to see their friends waiting for them. The bridegroom would have had enough light to show them the way.

What faith it would have taken, though, for those who had no light of their own, to wait without resources, exposing their need - that requires such honesty!

Sooner or later, each of us finds us at times in our lives when we're caught off guard, finding our lights sputtering, feeling like our resources, our belief structures, our faith in God, our faith in our clan, are dim and running out. What would it be like, No matter how fragile our light, no matter how dark the night, for us to wait, not seeking to be anything other than present right where we are?

Can we trust that in the end, when the light of the bridegroom arrives, whether our tiny oil lamps are flickering still or extinguished completely won't be what really matters. It's being ready, being present, ready to greet the bearer of light - that is what matters. Yes, the light of bridegroom will be enough for all, to illuminate the beauty of the darkness and to bring us in joy to the midnight celebration.

Here in our parable, the wise and the foolish, it seems, operate on the same premise of scarcity and fear. Neither trusts the love the bridegroom has for his friends. Neither

trusts that the bridegroom will embrace all regardless of whether they walk in light or sit in darkness. Neither remembers the words of the Psalmist who reassures us that to God night and day are the same, that the night is as bright as the noonday sun in God's presence. (Psalm 139)

The moss we learned of earlier - they have something to teach us about waiting. Waiting in dry, challenging times. Mosses wait in community, sharing their resources when they're abundant, thriving together, so that when the dryness comes, they can make it through those times together as well. A strange metaphor for our times in COVID. We may not gather, like the moss, tightly packed together, these days. But we do not need to wait alone. We must not allow the darkness, the aloneness, to cause us to forget. Mosses might look dead, look dried out, but they are just waiting. As we wait, wait for many different things...

Imagine with me a place where -

Whether we feel full, strong, resilient, able to face the winter, the holiday seasons ahead, ready to join the work of rebuilding our fractured country - whether you feel courageous, lamps full of faith, experiencing the light of Christ brightly,

or if we doubt - doubt God, doubt ourselves, fear the isolation of cold days and long nights, if we feel like we've run out of oil, with lamps sputtering, darkness creeping in -

wherever you find yourself - imagine with me - waiting together.  
Relying on the light of the shared community as we wait.

We are here to wait together, to share our light with one another, believing the promises of the Christ, that we are not to be afraid, that the light of Christ shows us the way.

Imagine that the light of Christ is enough, that we can come as we are and follow him to the feast.