

Today's parable of the 10 virgins (better translated as *bridesmaids*) only appears in Matthew's gospel, which tells us that the story would only truly resonate with a Jewish-Christian audience. You need to know something about Jewish marriage customs to appreciate what's going on. The groom would be expected to attend the bride's family at her home first. The bride, with her bridesmaids, would wait on the road between the homes of the bride and groom's family. At an unpredictable hour, the groom would travel down the road, meet up with the bridal party, and proceed to the groom's home where the multi-day celebration would take place. It would not be unusual for him to travel in the night, so everyone would be expected to have an oil lamp handy, ready to light the way.

Note that all of the bridesmaids know to bring lamps, and it is likely that the lamps had oil in them at the beginning. Apparently, since the groom was delayed, all of the lamps were going out as the girls slept. Suddenly, the groom is announced and the predictable mad scramble arises. You can picture the scene as lamps are refilled, lit once again, and raised high for the groom to see. And now we come to the first twist in the story. Five of the girls did not think to bring extra oil with them – their lamps go out, a major faux pas. They turn to the other five girls and ask for a share of the oil. Now the second twist. Somewhat rudely it seems, the other girls refuse to share. Go buy some, they are told. So the five foolish girls dash off to find an oil merchant. Right, at midnight! Good luck. But somehow, they do find a supply and dash over to the groom's house, ready to party. The third twist. It's too late. The door is locked and the groom's response to the girls is icy cold: "I do not know you..."

It's such a wonderfully evocative story. You can picture it playing out like a movie, full of humor and human foible, tsking away at those silly girls. But don't miss the point! The key to the parable is what? The *oil* – it's all about the oil. What does the oil symbolize? Many would say good works, or adherence to the law, or something more esoteric. The second twist, however, clues us in. The "oil", whatever that represents, cannot be shared. It is unique to each of us, we can store it away, and it can only be used by each of us as we choose. To me this means one thing only – our personal faith.

When we are young, learning about Jesus in classroom settings and the school of religion, we are like the foolish girls. We see the light in our teachers and try to mirror it in some simple way. I remember when I first

went away to college at Santa Clara, a good Jesuit religion professor challenged me. I answered some faith question he asked with a good Catechism answer, and he smiled in reply. Cool, I thought, I got it right. Then he looked me in the eye and asked, “But what do *you* believe?” I was dumbstruck. What does it matter what I think? Then he said something simple and profound. “Peter,” he said, “you need to own your faith!” You see, just like the foolish bridesmaids, my faith was simply a reflection of what others told me. If I was away from these folks, my lamp would barely sputter. I had nothing inside of me to tap into, nothing that would light my path in the dark. All of the oil I had was purchased from someone else. Worst of all, Jesus the Lord did not know me --- because I did not know Him.

Martin Luther famously said at one time, “You are going to die alone. You had better believe alone.”

So what does it mean to “own your faith”? The first reading gives us a clue. “Resplendent and unfading is wisdom, and she is readily perceived by those who love her, and found by those who seek her.” The first step in owning your faith is to seek out the object of that faith – God. The best pathway to understanding God is through Jesus, the bridge between God and humanity. So, seek Jesus. The point of our Christian faith as played out in parish life is to facilitate the search. The Church offers education, prayer experiences, retreats, opportunities to interact with the poor and marginalized, and of course, the Eucharist. Jesus can be found in all of these areas. But we are each unique – there is no one key to the door. I may be moved by a beautifully sung hymn, you may be touched in a moment of silent prayer, another may need a full-blown mountain top experience. I saw one of those just recently, and not surprisingly, it was in the prison.

At the last Kairos weekend, one of the inmates, William, an avowed pagan, was so moved by our speaker Charlie’s story of being lost and then found by Christ that he stood up in the middle of Charlie’s talk and cried out, “What do I have to do?! What do I have to do?!!” Charlie was stunned for a moment, but then, inspired by the Spirit, he simply opened his arms and nodded to William. He leapt forward and rushed into Charlie’s arms, sobbing and sobbing, crying out to Jesus to forgive him, to come to him. It was a stunning scene. The next day, I spoke at length with William, and he told me quite simply, “I don’t know what happened yesterday. I don’t remember rushing into Charlie’s embrace. All I can tell you is that no one can tell me that wasn’t real. No one can take that moment away from me.

Jesus is real!” And that, my friends, is *owning* your faith. It came to William all in a rush, a true St. Paul moment. It doesn’t come like that to everyone. But if you seek it, you will find it. And note William’s comment – *no one can take that away from me*. It is William’s oil, and although he can share the light, he can’t share the oil.

I’m a product of the Sacred Heart Catholic grammar school in upstate New York. I’m sure that I was a typical student, and the good teachers there found a way to infuse God into every class, even if it was as simple as a prayer before the lesson. My little oil lamp was as small as I was, and it held precious little oil, but here’s the important part. Sacred Heart School gave me a lens through which to see the world, a sense of safety, a confidence that God has it under control. It is true that I didn’t *own* my faith at that time, but the foundation was set for me to build upon when I was ready. That is a priceless gift. Our own St. James Catholic Academy continues that marvelous tradition. They’ve started a little program that allows us empty nesters to help out – it’s called the Guardian Angel Program. I ask you to look into it – any little bit helps.

So, let’s check your oil level. Here’s a simple exercise. We’ll be saying the Creed shortly, every line starting “I believe...” At a quiet moment, take the Creed and ask the same question after each and every statement, “Do I *really* believe that?” Be honest and be open. If you don’t understand what *consubstantial* means, join the crowd. If you’re not sure you believe in the Church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, then take note. For every uncertainty or pause, you have an invitation to seek an answer. You see, the question is not really about what *you* believe, it is about why so many people with brightly lit lamps believe it. There’s something there, and God wants you to dig into that statement of faith, because there’s oil in them thar hills!

A *deep* faith life is well named. It is indeed deep. One of the other inmates told me that it is all about that deepest part of yourself, the part only known to you and God. When that deep part, that deep place, is at peace, you’ve found God. I couldn’t agree more. Jesus called it living water, bubbling up inside. St. Paul called it Christ living within him. John Shea remarks, “How does Christ know us? He knows us when he looks into our face and sees himself.” One final observation. Each yes we make, each aha moment, always comes at a cost to our ego. We come to know that we are not God. We need a Savior. Can your pride allow a Savior into your life? The bridegroom is coming – don’t get caught by surprise.