

Our Gospel narrative for today is perhaps one of the best-known *biblical* illustrations of what is commonly referred to as Murphy's Law. If you don't know what that means, loosely translated it means that, *If anything can go wrong, it probably will*. But, before we explore Jesus Parable from Matthew, it might help us to hear a few Non-biblical, contemporary examples: Say for instance you've made arrangements to receive a call from a client on your cell phone at 3 p.m. and you've been taking calls all morning; unfortunately as 3 p.m. arrives, your battery goes dead, you don't have a charger with you, and you miss the call.

How about this one: Your 6-year-old daughter has been rehearsing her part as a turkey for a Thanksgiving school play about Pilgrims and Indians. When you finally arrive to watch her performance, you start to take a couple shots with your camera, its battery dies, and you miss the shots you really wanted.

This one might work too: You're not going to be late to work, but to make it on time, the universe needs to cooperate! And, of course, it doesn't. You have a flat -- bad enough -- but then you discover that your spare is also flat. This all happens today, because yesterday you told your boss you were late because you had a flat tire -- which you didn't. Now you do!

And finally, it's mid-evening, you're reading a really good book that you can't seem to put down, and all of a sudden, your neighborhood has a blackout. Not to worry: You're a fanatic about preparedness. *Semper fidelis* is your mantra. You reach for the flashlight, which you store in a drawer next to the nightstand near your bed. Then, with a sigh of frustration you remember that your flashlight is just a metal tube where you store dead batteries.

It's Murphy's Law. If anything can go wrong, it probably will. Notice the "probably." That's not much comfort. You can get a slice of bread and examine it on both sides, but you cannot predict which side will land on the kitchen floor -- until you butter it. Then you know. The good news though is, if we know about

Murphy's Law, then it's possible to invert it, because Murphy's Law is part of the universe as well. Thus, if anything can go wrong, and probably will, then the law itself can go wrong. But to invert the law, certain things need to happen.

You might say that some of the women in Jesus' story this morning were aware that it's possible to invert Murphy's Law, and they took steps to do so. Notice that none of the bridesmaids went to the wedding reception unprepared. They all had oil in their lamps. In that respect, early in the evening, there was no noticeable difference between the five who were wise, and those who were foolish. Moreover, they all became weary and took a nap while waiting for the party to begin. The only difference between the women, unnoticed at first, is that some carried a spare vial of oil on their person just in case, and then out of the blue Murphy's Law reared its ugly head.

As we continue to explore today's parable, it is important for us to note that oil was as important back then, as it is now. Maybe the "foolish" girls didn't carry an extra vial of oil because it was expensive, maybe it was selling for something like \$4 a gallon. Who knows? What we do know is that since this is a parable, some elements in the story most likely may have some sort of symbolic meaning attached to them. Consider, for example, the lamps that the bridesmaids are carrying. The lamp, according to Proverbs 20:27, can be considered the light of the Lord in the human spirit. It is this light, which might fade or burn out in a person. The oil that the ladies possessed, or needed, is widely regarded in Scripture as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The implication is that without the Holy Spirit, over time our lights may fade and grow dim.

Thankfully, the five wise women Jesus talks about in His Parable carried an extra supply. When they refueled, recharged, renewed their light source, they turned to an extra resource outside of themselves to save the day. This is a reminder that we cannot expect that the resources we have in our "lamps" will be

sufficient enough for all times and occasions. We must realize that in the ongoing experience of living in our world these days, it is possible that our fuel will begin to run low. The question for us to ponder then is: Are we carrying an external source of extra fuel? Do we know how to replenish the supply when our spirits grow dark or when it appears as though light is seeping from our souls?

Oddly enough, the wise women in Jesus parable were in no mood to share their oil with the foolish women, once the Bridegroom finally showed up. And who can blame them? They needed their oil reserves to take them through the rest of the evening, because at midnight, they were about to get their groove on! Their party hats were on point and they would need enough oil to celebrate into the early hours of the morning. That being said, as I was preparing for this past week's Bible study, I wondered if it would have been all that bad for the women in the story to share with one another?

Pastor, and author, Timothy Merrill tells the story of running out of light while he was with his family in Israel. One day, he and his wife, along with their two children decided that they wanted to hike through Hezekiah's Tunnel. Apparently, the entrance is no more than 30 inches wide and the height varies from 10 feet to 5 feet in some places. When they walked through it, the water came up to their knees in certain places. They knew that at different points during the day, the water level rose considerably depending on what was happening in the spring that fed that particular channel, which caused them a bit of concern.

"Is this safe?" his wife asked a Palestinian man sitting at a little wood table nearby. Yes, yes, safe," he said, passing his hand over his unshaved chin. "Very safe. No problem." Pastor Merrill asked him how long it would take to walk through the passageway.

"You walk twenty minutes. No problem," the Palestinian responded. Merrill gave him some money and the man gave him four candles, one for each person in

their group. Those candles were to provide enough light for the twenty minutes it would take to slosh through Hezekiah's Tunnel.

The candles illuminated the tunnel for only a few feet. And as they felt their way through the passageway, they sometimes had to stoop slightly as the tunnel shaft was not high enough to accommodate their height. After 10 minutes of wading hunchbacked through the water, Merrill began to think this trip might take longer than 20 minutes. He decided to blow out his candle. Since he was the last one in the group he had no trouble following his wife without his candle lit. He rightly thought they might need it if the others' went out. After 15 minutes of sloshing through the tunnel, following its curves, and ducking to avoid bumping their heads, he noticed that Jeanie, his wife, was getting a little edgy. "Are we there yet?"

Twenty minutes lapsed and they were still in the tunnel, with no indication that they were close to the end. Twenty-five minutes passed, 30 minutes, and now the candles were just about out. First one candle burnt out, then another. After thirty-five minutes had passed Merrill says, "Jeanie's candle was just about gone, and I was about to produce my candle when, at the 40 minutes mark we felt a rush of cool air and heard the sound of water flowing. This development energized our flagging spirits and we pressed on with fresh zeal. Soon we were at the other side, the end of Hezekiah's Tunnel!"

Merrill goes on to relate that while he didn't carry an extra candle, as a group they had extra light -- his unlit candle -- in reserve should it be needed. He says that the church, as a diverse body of people of different sizes, backgrounds, needs and perspectives, ought to have "candlepower" and "candle people" who can help to refuel, rekindle, and recharge the soul-lamps of people whose flame are flickering and about to go out. In this experience, Murphy's Law was applicable. The man said twenty minutes. It took at least forty. The man said the candles were

sufficient for the journey. They weren't. But in this case, as a family, they were able to invert the law.

Getting back to our story from Matthew's Gospel; Although this parable is often interpreted eschatologically, I wonder if perhaps we could consider the possibility that the "Groom" is calling us now? The Groom is calling the church to the banquet now, to fulfill its mission now, to open the door of opportunity now, to take steps of faith now. It may very well be that the church, is snoozing -- if not snoozing, there's a real sense of waiting, wondering what's going to happen next. But in this parable, Jesus offers no specific condemnation of the girls who fell asleep. All ten of them did, after all. But when the trumpet sounded, when the call came, when the bells were rung, five of these women were ready; the others were not. The first five snoozed, but didn't lose, because they were ready should the trumpet sound. The other five should not have been *snoozing*; they should have been *shopping* – shopping for some candlepower.

Which begs the question, what is the oil in our story or what might we as a congregation consider to be candlepower? A church with candlepower is a church that shows and also glows. That is, it's a church that shows up -- it has the candle of preparation. The spadework has been done. The foundation has been built. The groundwork is finished. The plans have been drawn up. Everything needed for the success of God's mission has been gathered! A church with candlepower has its candles. It shows up -- with candles at the ready, wicks trimmed.

It also glows! It has both the candle, and the flame. It has an external source of power that gives all the prior preparation its explosive and enlightening energy. A glowing church is one which is more than a mere candle -- but rather a torch or a beacon that lights the way. Such a church is a church which prays together, a church which studies together, a church which worships together, a church which remembers the sacraments together, a church which offers praise and thanksgiving

together. With such a church, Murphy's law doesn't stand a chance. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.