How many of us like to wait?

I don’t like to wait either. I look for the shortest line at the store, but then, of course, generally find that the shortest one turns out to have some challenge – someone counting out all their pennies to pay for their items. I don’t like to wait a long time when I go to the dentist. I hate waiting in airports when my flight has been delayed because when a flight is delayed once, it generally keeps getting delayed more and more, sometimes making me more and more anxious about getting where I want to go.

The early Christians in Matthew’s time didn’t like waiting either. They had been waiting for Jesus to come again to earth and receive them. They thought he would come quickly, but he had not done so and they were being persecuted while waiting. Jesus’s return seemed to be longer and longer and, in fact, folks may even have wondered if Jesus was coming at all.

When Matthew wrote his Gospel, he chose to include this parable of Jesus, which speaks to waiting. Specifically, the parable speaks to being sure we have enough oil to last as long as necessary until Jesus comes.

In the days of Jesus, wedding feasts typically went like this. On the day of the wedding, all the bride’s maids would gather at the bride’s house. The groom would meet with the bride’s father to settle any lingering details about the dowry, then he would go to the bride’s house to receive her. She and all the bride’s maids then processed from the bride’s house to the groom’s house where the wedding actually took place. In the case of our parable, however, the groom is late and some of the bride’s maids run out of oil and are unable to find the 1st century equivalent of a 24-hour Wal-Mart to buy more. Because they lacked enough oil in their reserves, they were not able to greet the bride groom and missed out on the great joy of the wedding.

The parable, which is talking about the time of Jesus’s coming again, clearly isn’t focusing on whether or not we have enough literal oil for literal lamps. After all, Jesus is the light of the world – when Jesus comes there’s no need for any other light. Oil is a metaphor for something else and I would like to suggest that it is spiritual reserves. The parable is about whether or not we have enough spiritual reserves to stay ready as we wait for the coming of the Lord. Spiritual reserves are built up when we remain in the community of the church, pray, read Scripture, practice forgiveness, and do deeds of mercy, justice and peace. Basically, the more we live as Jesus taught us to live and the more time we spend with Him, the more “oil” we have.

This is why the wise maids didn’t give any oil to the foolish ones in the parable – they couldn’t. Because we must build up this oil for ourselves as our hearts change and our relationships to Jesus and others change, through these spiritual practices. If we don’t remain in community and fail to pray and practice mercy and forgiveness, we don’t have enough reserves to stand the waiting especially as challenges happen as we wait. No one else can give us these reserves.

We lose jobs, we get sick, we lose friends or loved ones to estrangement or cancer. If we haven’t built up enough “oil” through our discipleship with Jesus, we will run out during these times of challenges and won’t have enough when Jesus comes into our lives. This oil is something that is built up over years of faithful Christian practice, it’s not something you can buy at Wal-Mart at the 11th hour.

Now while this parable was told specifically to apply to Jesus’s second coming in glory to earth or in coming to receive us in death, it also applies to the regular, everyday times when Jesus comes to us in the midst of our lives. For example, Jesus comes when critically ill people know that they are safe in God’s love. Jesus comes when we realize that no matter whether we have achieved all we wanted in our career, we have done what God called us to do. Jesus comes when we see a beautiful sunset or the opening of a flower. Heaven breaks into earth when faithful people live in hope. Jesus comes when people who have been angry with each other become friends again. Jesus comes each time we realize that no matter the bad things that happen in the world, God ultimately is in control and that all of history is moving toward holy completion.

If we run out of “oil” during times of challenges, we fail to see these comings of the Lord. We miss out on the joy of those comings and, instead, see only the bad without the hope and love.

A Bohemian-Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote a series of letters to a young military officer who also sought to be a poet. In one letter, he responds to the young man’s comment that he had lost his belief in God – basically the young man’s comment that he had run out of oil.

Rilke wrote: “Why don’t you think of Him as the one who is coming, who has been approaching from all eternity? What keeps you from projecting his birth into the ages that are coming into existence, and living your life as a painful and lovely day in the history of a great pregnancy?

Jesus will come in a very big way in glory over all the earth in the future. And, in the meantime, Jesus also comes in small ways to us every day. We are prepared to see Jesus and to join in the joy of his coming, when we keep enough oil in our reserves.

Amen