

Sermon: Now, About That Oil  
Text: Matthew 25:1-13  
Date: November 9, 2014  
Context: WWPC  
Third Sunday of Stewardship Season  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.*

Over the years since I've been here at Warren Wilson, I've probably attended a dozen or more lectures on the environment, and on what we can do, what we must do, to protect it.

In the early days I went to these lectures enthusiastically. My interest was fueled by the belief that I might hear something helpful—some practical knowledge or specific tips for how I can be a better steward of creation in my own life.

But that's not what happened. I'm sure that there have been speakers on campus on this topic that have provided just such practical knowledge and helpful tips. But I have missed those presentations.

Instead the ones I have attended have all gone something like this:

*Climate change is big. No it's huge. And it's not happening 50 years from now. It's happening now. Ice caps are melting. The sky is falling.*

*The problem is too big to make a difference. It's now too late to make a difference. We're doomed. The end. Thanks for coming. Have a good evening.*

It always takes me some time to reclaim my hope and regain my equilibrium after these presentations, so much so that I've become reluctant to go to them.

But one speaker does stand out for taking a different approach to the issue. His name is Bill McKibben. I've mentioned him before.

In environmental circles Bill McKibben is something of a rock star. His book, *The End of Nature*, published in 1989, is widely considered the first book on global warming written for a general audience.

Since then McKibben has gone on to found 350.org, by far the world's largest grassroots environmental organization, and the driving force behind the massive climate march that took place in New York City this past September.

In person Bill McKibben is a mild-mannered guy. He's also exceptionally bright. He's a Harvard grad and he is now the Schumann Distinguished Scholar in Environmental Studies at Middlebury College.

He is also a truth-teller, a modern prophet of sorts, and a tireless activist for the great causes he believes in. As a result he's been named by the venerable political magazine *Foreign Policy* as one of the one hundred most important global thinkers of our time.

He's been profiled on television, quoted in the New York Times, maligned by his detractors and arrested for chaining himself to the White House fence to protest the approval of the Keystone XL pipeline.

So it's no surprise that, in activist circles, Bill McKibben is a rock star. What is a surprise for many people is that . . . wait for it . . . Bill McKibben also a Methodist. Indeed, if memory serves, I believe he teaches Sunday school in his home church.

A few years ago McKibben came here to Warren Wilson at the invitation of the Environmental Leadership Center.

What made his talk here so remarkable, and so different from the many other speakers who have addressed environmental issues here, is that he did something very unlikely at Warren Wilson College, or any liberal arts college for that matter.

This brilliant, rock star environmental advocate and activist came at the problem of climate change from a biblical point of view.

He began his talk by focusing in on an episode from the story of Job. He recounted how Job had consulted with some of his so-called friends about the predicament he was in, to get their take on why so many bad things had happened to him.

After they'd had their say, it was then Yahweh's turn. *Where were you, Job, when I laid the foundations of the earth? Did you make the mountains rise? Did you create the seas? Who are you to impugn me, the Creator of the heavens and the earth?*

This exchange between Job and his friends and the speech by Yahweh that followed it come literally straight out of scripture, but because he was telling a story, Bill McKibben had his audience of students, faculty, staff and visitors in the palm of his hand.

And then he made the most audacious move I've ever heard anyone make when addressing the topic of climate change.

He took the story of Job and he turned it on its head. He said that at this point in history, this conversation would go down entirely differently. As a species we could now reply to Yahweh's question.

*Who are we to challenge you, the Creator of the heavens and the earth? Well, you know what, God? You may have made the mountains rise, but we have taken the tops off them to mine their coal. You may have created the seas, but we have caused them to heat up and to rise until their waters are flooding our coastal cities. We have changed the very climate of this planet. We have done that.*

I sat in stunned silence afterward. Hearing those words was like a punch to the heart, so in some ways McKibben's talks was not that much different from some of the other lectures I've heard on this topic.

But it helped me understand something really, really pivotal. It helped me appreciate the power of scripture and of sacred stories in doing this work, in helping us ordinary folk, us church folk in particular, become better stewards of the environment.

Indeed that may have been the moment I finally understood that climate change is not just a scientific, or economic, or political issue, though it certainly is all of those things.

At its base, at its root, it is a moral issue. When we know something is wrong, and we persist in doing it, that is a moral decision.

When you resort to fracturing the earth's deep geological structures to get at oil, with the result that you poison aquifers and turn tap water into something you can light on fire, that is not just an economic decision, it's a moral decision.

Now, on its surface the story we read a few minutes ago of these ten maidens – virgins in the Greek – is a fairly predictable candidate for a stewardship sermon.

In fact, it's part of a series of short parables Jesus tells in the Gospel of Matthew that are all centered around how we use the resources that are entrusted to us. It's like Jesus' own mini-library of stewardship stories.

But this text may seem like an odd choice for a sermon about environmental stewardship, and not just because it's about oil, but because the moral of the story, ultimately, seems to be about being ready for Christ's return.

And so this story has actually been used for the exact opposite purpose that we have in mind this morning. Some of our more fundamentalist friends have found in its message a rationale for giving up on the environment.

If Jesus is coming back any minute, why bother with recycling, or with buying a hybrid vehicle, or working for an end to fossil fuels in general if the whole world is going to go up in smoke anyway?

Indeed, there's a sign right now outside of the Berea Baptist Church around the corner on Riceville Road: Winter is coming. So is Jesus. Are you ready?

From a stewardship angle, from the standpoint of caring for the earth and its resources, this is possibly the worst theology in the history of the world.

Suppose the Second Coming is real and literal. It's already been 2100 years since Jesus told this story. What's to say it won't be another 2100?

Even then, we will still need energy to power our cities, drive our transportation and heat and cool our homes, whatever those homes may look like that far in the future.

In the parable, when the bridegroom returns, the maidens who are invited into the wedding are the ones with oil in their lamps, the ones who have been good stewards of a precious resources.

I believe that, today twenty-one centuries later, our relationship to oil itself, and to energy more generally, is still essential to our calling to be good stewards of the earth's precious resources.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. It's a story that highlights the fact that environmental stewardship is moral issue, not a partisan issue, and one that can unite people from very different points on the political and religious spectrum.

Many of you know that I serve on the steering committee of a grass roots group called the Creation Care Alliance (formerly WNC Green Congregations). CCA is a coalition of individuals and communities of faith who are united around our concern for creation.

In September CCA organized a public forum on fracking. I did not go, partly because the forum was during working hours on a weekday, and also because it was in Cullowee.

But nevertheless dozens of people turned up, most of them residents of that area. Which is to say, these were mainly good, mountain folk. Which is also to say they are generally people who would rather not be found rubbing shoulders in a room full of Sierra Club members.

The balance of the people in the room that day were, in fact, Sierra Club members, or environmental advocates or activists of some kind, which is to say people who ordinarily have very little occasion to make common cause with people who are not from Asheville and whose politics bleed a different color from their own.

And here's the key point. I think that's what the Kingdom of God looks like. Jesus introduces this parable this way: *Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this...*

I think the same could be said of that gathering in Cullowee. *Then Kingdom of God, the realm of God, will look like this...* people of differing political and theological view points and of differing educational levels, people who watch Duck Dynasty and people who watch Downton Abby, people who live in the cities and people who live in the country, all of these people come together and are united a simple desire:

That the water that flows from our taps is water we can drink, not water we can set on fire. That the air that fills the valleys where we live and blows through these beautiful mountains is air we can breath, not air we can see.

Now I don't have to tell you that following the results of last Tuesday's vote, this is going to take a little extra effort. This election was about many things, of course. And of course I fully support every person's right to vote their conscience on the issues, as they understand them.

But it's also no secret that there are now interests on the rise in this country that view our responsibility to steward the earth's resources differently than we do.

And so it's going to be all the more important that people of faith unite and partner together across lines of difference to protect our precious natural resources. In this stewardship season, I hope we will find new ways to do that, as a congregation, as individuals and as partners together in Christ's service.

Amen