

Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus said, “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.”

Two thousand years of anxiety about who’s getting into heaven and who isn’t have turned this parable into something it is not. True, it’s odd and confusing. And trying to make it fit our preconceived expectations causes it to dissolve into dark divisiveness.

And so, I was tempted to explain why Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians is, in fact, good news for everyone, not an ill-conceived story about Terminator Jesus coming to fry people. But that would leave this parable hanging out there like a big wet Matzoh ball for another three years.

Now, there are some people who will tell you that this parable is about God lying in wait to get people who aren’t – I don’t know – clever enough? Good enough? Oily enough? These are all such unworthy ways of picturing God.

“God is not,” as Episcopal theologian Robert Capon says, “our mother-in-law, coming to see whether her wedding-present china has been chipped.” Even so, this awkward and complicated little parable about some unfamiliar wedding practices can feel threatening.

Fortunately, allowing ourselves to be perplexed by new complexity is often the path to Christian growth and maturity in our faith. There *is* simplicity and joy at the heart of this convoluted parable. We just have to relax our grasping, seeking minds a little and trust that God will open us to new insights.

After all, we do want to find and follow Jesus Christ instead of some unreasonably angry idol that we have created.

So, let's talk about these ten young women. Only Matthew gives us this story. Matthew, who gives us more warnings about hellfire and gnashing teeth than the other three Gospels combined. "*Then*," Jesus begins, although we don't hear it in the lectionary version, but in the Greek, Jesus continues: "Then the kingdom of heaven *will be likened* to this."

"At that time," in other words, people will compare the reign of the heavens to ten unmarried teenagers, probably servants, waiting for the master of the house, a groom, to return to his home.

Now, Matthew's Jesus does like to parallel stories about men with stories about women. So, having just given the disciples a story about how the master of the house might treat a *male* servant who may or may not be faithful, telling this story about women is a good balance.

So far, so good, right? Well, now the story gets a bit wonky. (That's a technical theological term that means "what the...?") First, there is no mention of the bride in this story. That's a little odd, but we can assume that she's is waiting at the banquet. Clearly, Jesus wants us to focus on these ten young women who have all been invited to a party.

Five of them, the foolish five, assume that a daytime wedding might go as late as early evening, so they bring lamps filled with oil, just in case. They don't show up to a party toting an extra jug of lamp oil, but they do have financial resources to buy more if the need should arise.

So, what makes them foolish?

Then there are five other women, five wise women. Five women who are as over-prepared as people in the Mojave who carry flood insurance. They have made bizarre arrangements to handle an absolutely improbable event. When was the last time you went to a wedding reception with a flashlight and extra batteries?

In any case, if by some bizarre turn of events someone at the party needed oil, surely these wise sisters would share. After all, Matthew's Jesus insisted that his followers should give to everyone who begs from them and never refuse anyone who wants to borrow from them. Instead, these five women who packed for a camping weekend won't even behave like most first-graders would and share their extra.

So, what makes them wise?

Something far more confounding happens in the middle of the story. All ten fell asleep – the one thing Jesus warned against in the last line of the parable: “Keep awake!”

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be likened to this,” Jesus says at the beginning. And at the end, “Be alert, for you do not know the day or the hour.”

We scare ourselves mindless with a “now-or-never” sense of urgency to prepare ourselves and a “once-and-forever” sense of the finality of God’s judgment. We chastise ourselves and each other. We hope and plan to be the wise sisters who will be welcomed into heaven. Will we also just shrug our shoulders at those who are not prepared?

You can see that there are some problems.

The difference between those who entered and those who did not was *not* that the wise women stayed alert and the foolish women didn’t. *None* of the ten stayed awake. The midnight shout woke them all up.

The difference did have to do with who was prepared and who was not, but not in the way we often hear the story. We can’t equate the lamp oil with good works or with faith or with compassion. The women who had extra oil showed little evidence of care for anyone but themselves. They had little or no trust in the groom or compassion for the other women who had also been invited.

This is a story that people will tell about heaven. For Jesus, this is not a story about what will happen at the end of time. No, his story has a delightful twist in it.

“Be alert, for you do not know the day or the hour.”

In the ancient world, most Jews didn’t expect that God would someday end the created universe. They expected and hoped that God would act *within* the created universe, as God did in the Exodus, the defining story of Judaism. They expected God to act so dramatically, in fact, that the only way to talk about it was to describe God taking the world apart and recreating it.

That’s the tradition that Jesus inherited and trusted. And so, as Bishop Tom Wright has pointed out, Jesus told stories “whose many dimensions cracked open the worldview of his hearers and forced them to come to terms with God’s reality *breaking into* [emphasis mine] their midst, doing what they

had always longed for but doing it in ways that were so startling as to be hardly recognizable.”

“Be alert, for you do not know the day or the hour.”

Here is the hardly recognizable simplicity in this parable: *This, this is* the day and the hour. Jesus, standing before his listeners, is saying “Wake up! Look, the bridegroom! Come meet me.”

This strange little parable is not about getting us into heaven but about getting heaven into us. It’s not simply a warning to get prepared, so much as it is an alert that the banquet has already begun. We are standing at the doorway to a banquet already underway; a banquet already recreating the world in which the children of Israel are fulfilling their ancient vocation to be the light of creation.

That light is the grace of God by which the Holy One is being revealed to the waiting world.

All people are created out of the love of God for the love of God, and so all are invited into the fullest expression of that love. The way we say: “yes, thanks, I’d love to come” is to trust God with all our confusion and anxiety and unworthiness; to open up and to show up.

We are invited to live in the domain of God’s true peace, not because we have earned our entry or because we are wise in worldly ways. We join the banquet if we are just wise enough to trust that God’s love will be the final word. If we are just a bit *more* wise and a little bit compassionate, we will share the light so that no one is left waiting outside.

The light in our lamps, you see, is not there to illuminate our path out of this world and into the next. The light of God’s grace is there to illuminate the approach of the groom toward the people of this world. And so, in anticipation of joining God’s heavenly banquet, on this day and in this hour, let me read you a poem by Thomas Merton called “Les Cinq Vierges:”

There were five howling virgins
Who came
To the Wedding of the Lamb
With their disabled motorcycles
And their oil tanks
Empty
But since they knew how
To dance,

A person says to them
To stay anyhow.
And there you have it:
There were five noisy virgins
Without gas
But looking good
in the traffic of the dance.
Consequently
There were ten virgins
At the wedding of the Lamb.

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