

“Waiting Gone Awry!”

Matthew 25:1-13

At first glance, this parable is not comforting. This parable does not make me feel good. This parable challenges most of the things I believe about God and Jesus. For me, it doesn't make sense to compare this parable with that of the Kingdom of Heaven. I don't want to preach on the 5 wise bridesmaids, who have extra oil but didn't share with the foolish. I don't want to criticize and point fingers at the 5 foolish bridesmaids who left their post to get more oil thus making them late for the wedding. And I detest preaching about the bridegroom who was interpreted by many Christians as Jesus Christ himself shutting the door at the foolish bridesmaids and turning a deaf ear to their pleas to come in. This is not who Jesus is! What do we do with a difficult parable like this? Do we completely ignore it and not explore its message? Certainly not.

In this parable, Matthew uses the imagery of a wedding in the first century. In ancient Jewish tradition, weddings begin with a proposal between the fathers of the bride and groom. The fathers would arrange the marriage by exchanging an engagement contract. The engagement which is the waiting period could last up to a year. The groom keeps himself busy at work with the aim of preparing a place for his bride, supporting her and any children that they may have. During this period, it was up to the bridesmaids to wait for the groom. The bridesmaids were younger sisters or cousins or close friends and according to Jewish tradition, there were usually ten. It is the custom that the groom arrives in a procession at night in order for the whole town to be home and be able to celebrate. The bridesmaids carried torches that were ignited with oil. When the groom comes, he collects his bride and her bridesmaids walked alongside her, singing, dancing and creating an atmosphere of celebration. The procession went throughout the town and all came out to celebrate with the bride and the groom, to signify that the period of waiting was over. The procession then culminated in a feast that often lasted up to seven days.

For most of my life, I have identified with the five wise bridesmaids, always seeking to have enough oil in my lamp – good works, values, and faith – to come prepared when things get tough. The truth is- I do like to be prepared. I believe in being prepared, and I bet you do, too. We are part of a culture that practically loves planning, organizing and forethought and

preparation for the unknown that lies ahead. I think it is why we get so angry when something goes horribly wrong. We love to be on the safe side – to be like the 5 wise bridesmaids. But do we really like to see ourselves as the wise ones, those who have extra oil who refuse to share with the have nots? Are we glad to celebrate the wise ones who are responsible for the hell the foolish must endure?

There are times too when I saw myself as the five foolish bridesmaids, having just enough oil to last me for a day – just enough energy, just enough patience, just enough resources, just enough faith- watching as my lamp's light slowly evaporated in thin air, sometimes quite resentful of those whose lamps still burned so brightly. What is wrong with that? So I wonder what mistake did the foolish bridesmaids make? What made them so foolish? In the parable, Matthew narrates that everyone fell asleep, even the wise, when they should have kept awake. Surely the foolish ones cannot be blamed for not being watchful enough as the story indicates. And it was the bridegroom, not the bridal party, who broke social protocol, took his time and arrived late for the banquet. Surely the foolish ones cannot be shut out for being late to the banquet. The bridegroom was the late one! But what would have happened, I wonder, had the foolish bridesmaids simply continued to wait, with flickering lamps? What would have happened if they simply waited in the darkness of the night? Waiting is difficult, waiting is hard. But I think they should have persisted no matter what. I think this was the only mistake made by the foolish bridesmaids. They left, when they should have stayed. They redirected their time and energy looking for oil when they could have waited persistently and risked. I'm sure the bride and the groom would have welcomed them into party, unconcerned about the state of their oil lamps, happy just to see their friends waiting for them. So no matter how thin their light, no matter how dark the night, they should have waited.

There is more that bothers me about this parable. What are we to do with those wise ones who did not share even an ounce of oil, those wise ones who chose their needs over the needs of others? What are we to do with them? Some interpreters even elevated them to be emulated by us. How could we sympathize with their selfish behaviour? Them who held their heads up high and said: "We cannot share with you because we might not have enough for ourselves. We're not sure, but just to be safe, we're not sharing what we have." Is this the good news here? Be prepared, hang onto your oil, and remember that only a fool gives it away. Well, that's

depressing for me. Couldn't we reasonably conclude that perhaps Matthew portrayed Jesus unjustly in this parable? Or is the Kingdom of Heaven really no different than the empires of earth, where we hoard material goods for our own survival?

The parable lacks many details. It doesn't say a word about motives or circumstances or reasons why five women have no extra oil. And that's significant, I think. Maybe this is not a story about how much oil you have. Maybe this is a story about the kind of oil you carry with you. To prepare for the delay not for the time being – oil for emergency – turning the other cheek, going the extra mile. What fills you up when you run out of oil? What replenishes your oil? Where do you find God, and how can you make sure that you get enough of that oil for your lamp, so that God can fill you up again? Because you will run dry. And when you do, you can't be a light for anybody. I like what Anna Carter Florence has to say about this: “There are some kinds of oil you can't borrow from anyone else. There are some kinds of preparation we can only do for ourselves. There are some reserves that no one else can build up for us. You can't borrow someone else's peace of mind or their passion for God. You can't say to your friend, "You have such a happy marriage, don't you? Could you give me some of that?" It doesn't work. You have to find it yourself. You have to figure out what fills you up, spiritually, mentally, physically, emotionally and then make sure you have some to carry with you, every single minute of the day, because that's how often you'll need it.”

What I gauge from this parable is the fact that both the wise and the foolish operate on the same premise of scarcity and fear. Neither trusts the love the bridegroom has for his friends. Neither trusts that the bridegroom will embrace all regardless of whether they walk in light or walk in darkness. Both wanted to please the groom. The wise ones bringing extra oil and the foolish ones to have gone to amazing lengths to look for oil while the rest of the town feasted. Yet, traditional takes on this parable to praise behaviour that runs counter to the central message of Jesus: the gospel of radical inclusivity and compassion.

What are we to do with this bridegroom, the one who apparently was interpreted over and over again as Christ-figure who acts so uncaring, so cold and calculating, who shut the door and tells the foolish bridesmaids to go away? This is not the same Jesus that we know, the shepherd who leaves the 99 to search for the lost one, the woman who leaves no corner of her house unturned in search of a lost coin, the prodigal father who lovingly waits for his prodigal son to

come home. Some think that this parable is about the end times or what others believed to be the second coming of Christ. If the bridegroom is already with his bride when he arrives, this parable cannot be interpreted as the second coming of Christ. It can't. Because this parable isn't about the return of Christ. The Spirit of Jesus Christ lives among us here and now so why would interpreters think Jesus is still not here with us?

By the time Matthew wrote this parable, the discipleship community may have been waiting for Jesus' return for fifty years or more. Most of the eye-witnesses were likely dead. The church had spread, but it had also been oppressed and persecuted. We need to acknowledge that Matthew was a book written shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem at a time when Jewish institutional leaders were understandably licking their wounds and were clamping down on rebellious and heretical strands of Judaism, including, of course, the Jesus movement. They were drawing lines of who was in and who was out. In other words, this is a story about real life, about the religious leaders who literally shut the doors of the temple to those who follow this rabbi named Jesus.

Where do you find yourself in this difficult story? Have you been the foolish whose lamps have run out? the wise who feared sharing and losing what they had? the bridegroom who refused to let people in? So, if you find yourself feeling like the foolish bridesmaids, remember to wait in the darkness. Don't run from it. It is a holy place and God will meet you there. If you find yourself feeling like the wise bridesmaids, remember to share what you have, even if it scares you. The opportunity to give of yourself is a holy place and God will meet you there. And if you find yourself feeling like the bridegroom, remember to open wide the door to the banquet feast. Don't let hurt feelings and fear insulate you from others. Welcoming those who have made mistakes and who walk in darkness is a holy place. God will meet you there.

And remember what the 10 bridesmaids were waiting for. It wasn't a funeral. It was a wedding. This is not a parable about what happens at the end of life. This is a parable about the nature of life itself! So, Matthew's message to us might be this: be prepared no matter what – whether you have enough or more than enough, because we meet Christ in many different situations each and every day! We meet Christ over and over again in the lives and in the faces of the people we meet! Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

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