

November 12 2017

Matthew 25: 1-13

Adapted slightly from David Henson¹:

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

Five of them were foolish and five were wise.

— “But if you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.”

The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

— In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus came to his disciples and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?” —

At midnight the cry rang out: “Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!”

Then all those bridesmaids woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.”

— A smoldering wick he will not snuff out —

“No,” they replied, “there may not be enough for both us and you.”

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2014/11/the-breaking-of-the-bridesmaids-how-scripture-undermines-a-parable/>

— Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you —
“Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.”

— Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” —

But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived.

— In the city of God, they will not need the light of a lamp, for the Lord God will give them light. —

The bridesmaids who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet.

— But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. —

And the door was shut.

— “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. —

Later the others also came. “Sir! Sir!” they said. “Open the door for us!”

But he replied, “I tell you the truth, I don't know you.”

— If anyone shuts their ears to the cry of the poor, they too will cry out and not be answered. —

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For much of my life, I have identified with the five wise bridesmaids, always seeking to have enough of the good stuff in my lamp — good works and faith — to persevere in a dark, busy, sometimes frightening world.

I envisioned myself as one of the wise, holding onto my lamp in the dead of night when things are tough. But my sympathies wavered when I began to doubt for the first, but certainly not the last, time.

Suddenly, I saw myself as a foolish bridesmaid, watching as my lamp's light evaporated into a thin tendril of smoke, quite jealous of those whose faith still burned so brightly.

I was foolish, begging my lamp not to die.

I could no more conjure more faith or light in my life than the foolish bridesmaids could conjure up the needed oil in the dead of night.

So I began to ask,

“What mistake did the foolish bridesmaids make? What made them so foolish?”

Everyone fell asleep, even the wise, when they should have kept awake. Surely they cannot be faulted for not being watchful enough as the story's closing admonition indicates.

And it was the bridegroom, not the bridal party, who broke social protocol and arrived exceptionally late for their own banquet. Surely they 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 bridesmaids simply continued to wait, with sputtering lamps and dwindling lights?

What would have happened had the bridesmaids simply waited in the darkness of the night?

To me, this was their mistake. They left, when they should have stayed. The bridal couple surely would

have welcomed their friends into the light of the banquet, unconcerned about the state of their oil lamps, happy just to see their friends waiting for them. What faith it would have taken, though, to wait in such frailty, in such honesty!

So no matter how thin our light, no matter how dark the night, we wait, not seeking to be anything other than present right where we are. We trust that in the end, when the light of the bridegroom arrives, it won't matter whether our tiny oil lamps are flickering still or extinguished completely. Rather the light of the bridegroom will be enough for all, to illuminate the beauty of the darkness and to bring us in joy to the midnight celebration.

But there is more that bothers me about this parable. What are we to do with those wise ones who couldn't spare an ounce of oil, those wise ones who chose their needs over the needs of others? What are we to do with them?

Truly, I can think of nowhere else in the Bible that we have afforded such selfish behaviour such an exalted place. No, they say, 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.

The wise and the foolish, it seems, 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.

Neither remembers the words of the Psalmist who reassures us that to God night and day are the same and the night is as bright as the noonday sun.

So the wise break up the bridal party and send the foolish away to beg and bang on the doors of friends, relatives, and shopkeepers in search of oil.

By the time they get back, they are ostracised, left out in the cold and dark of night. Surely, the groom thought them to be derelict friends who couldn't wait up with him just a few more hours. Perhaps he thought they had simply given up and gone home during the long delay.

But nothing could have been further from the truth. They have done nothing wrong. They bear no great sin. They wanted to please the groom so much that they have gone to amazing lengths to scrounge up oil while the rest of the town slept and the wedding party feasted.

Yet, traditional takes on this passage continue to praise behaviour that runs counter to the central message of Jesus: the gospel of radical inclusivity and compassion.

Yet, we praise the wise ones, the haves, who refuse to share with the have nots.

Yet, we celebrate the wise ones who are responsible for the cold hell the foolish must endure.

And then, what are we to do with this bridegroom, this apparent Christ-figure who acts so uncharitably, who tells the industrious foolish bridesmaids to go away? Is this the same Jesus, the shepherd who leaves the 99 to search for the lost one, the woman who leaves no stone unturned in search of a lost coin?

In a word. No.

According to the customs during the first century, the groom would have arrived to the wedding celebration with the bride, not as the text seems to imply, to get the bride. The bridesmaids would have been her friends and would be awaiting her return with the groom. Indeed, many scholars agree that the original parable likely included the bride and the bridegroom arriving late together. However, this would contradict the conventional understanding of the story.

If the bridegroom is already with his bride when he arrives, then how can this parable be interpreted as the return of Christ for his bride?

It can't. Because this parable isn't about the return of Christ.

Here it is instructive to remember 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 regrouping. They 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 religious leaders who literally shut the doors of the synagogue to the Jesus movement.

When Jesus gets to the end of his kingdom of heaven series (Bridesmaids, Talents, Sheep & Goats), he informs his listeners who were the truly foolish and who were the truly wise in each of his parables.

In the end, Jesus says, those on their way to heaven will be decided by what they gave away, whether they fed the poor, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and imprisoned.

Whether they shared what they had. Whether they shared their oil.

If they hoarded what they had, they, of course, already enjoyed their reward. It was comforting, of course, but temporary.

The wise on earth had their wedding feast on earth.

But that is not how it will be in the kingdom of heaven.

I could go on and on about this parable. More than almost anywhere else in Scripture, I find myself in this story. Because as it turns out, I've probably been each of this parable's characters. You probably have been too.

I've been the foolish whose lamps have run out. I've been the wise who feared sharing and losing what they had. I've been the bridegroom who refused to let people in.

And maybe, in the end, that's what this parable does. Maybe that's what all good short stories do.

They allow us to find ourselves, warts and all.

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.

So if you find yourself feeling like the wise bridesmaids, remember to share what you have, even if it scares you. Don't trade temporary comfort for lasting and beloved community. The chance to give of yourself is a holy place and God will meet you there.

So 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.

What instructive thoughts as we meet for our AGM today!

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2014/11/the-breaking-of-the-bridesmaids-how-scripture-undermines-a-parable/#pHtZk5b1Vwmz8H30.99>