

Parables were one of the ways that Jesus told stories, while bringing in the element of surprise. He knew how to send his listeners away asking more questions than having the answers. I know many times that's where I land when listening to and reading Jesus' parables. Parables aren't simply illustrations. No. The Gospel writers, in their wisdom, left most of the parables as open narratives in order to invite us into engagement with them (AJ Levine, *Short Stories By Jesus*). Parables are designed to provoke or indict. The same parable can leave multiple impressions over time- thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit among us. Through them, Jesus could make really bold claims that revealed truth for those who had ears to hear. We have often heard that religion should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. "We do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing the afflicting. If we stop with the easy lessons, good though they may be, we lose the way Jesus' first followers would have heard the parables, and we lose the genius of Jesus' teaching. We might be better off thinking **less about** what they 'mean' and **more about** what they can 'do': remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb..." (Levine). I must confess that for many years I have not liked this morning's parable. I've never preached on it. It does what it is supposed to, and it disturbs me. It is a doozy of a puzzling story that seems to contradict some of Jesus' teachings. Most of us want morals to all of our stories, including parables, but not all stories have morals. All the more reason to look at the context whenever reading scripture. "Each of these four parables addresses some problem or issue that Matthew's church was experiencing as they waited for the kingdom of God to fully come to fruition" (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*). I invite you to

wonder with me as we think together about this second of four parables Jesus offers back-to-back in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus tells these parables around “the midpoint of his teachings on the end times (24:1-25:46)” (Thomas D. Stegman, *FOW*) and Matthew is known to talk more than the other gospel writers about final judgment. Some of these parables, including today’s parable, involve teaching about the Parousia, or Jesus’ second coming. Today’s parable only appears in Matthew’s Gospel; it is the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids or the Wise and Foolish Maidens. Before turning to God’s word for us this day, let us first pray.

PRAY. READ.

I’ve been a bridesmaid 14 times. That means 14 very different dresses over a span of 10 or so years. I didn’t say if I was wise or foolish, as that may have depended on the wedding. However, in each of the weddings different things were expected of me in my role. Same in Jesus’ day, where weddings could be just as emotionally charged as they are today. The wedding customs of Jesus’ day involved guests gathering first at the home of the bride where they were entertained by her parents while waiting for the groom or bridegroom, which is a guy just married or about to be married. “When the bridegroom approached, the guests, including the bridesmaids, lighted torches and went out to greet him. In a festive procession, the entire wedding party walked to the groom’s home where his parents were waiting for the ceremony and the extended banquet that would follow and continue for several days” (John M. Buchanan, *FOW*). In today’s parable, there is no mention of a bride, and the groom, also known as the bridegroom, doesn’t show up

on time. We aren't told why. Was he a runaway groom or did he get caught in traffic? Regardless, the hours pass and the bridesmaids ALL fall asleep while waiting for him.

Like many other parables in Matthew, this one leans heavily into allegory. That is, each thing in the parable symbolizes other things, and Matthew's readers are supposed to be able to crack the code. Such as: the wedding symbolizes the fully realized kingdom of heaven. The bridegroom is Jesus Christ when he returns. The bridesmaids are disciples/members of Christ's church. Yet, there is a distinction made among the ten bridesmaids: half are wise and half are foolish. What makes them have these labels? They ALL fell asleep while waiting, so that is not the distinctive issue. We're told of the bridegroom's midnight arrival by a shout, "Look! Here is the Bridegroom! Come out to meet him" (v. 6)! Herein lies what seems to be the moment of truth. Every bridesmaid gets up and grabs their lamps. The wise bridesmaids are prepared with extra oil but not the foolish bridesmaids. The wise ones don't share their oil when asked. The foolish ones go and try to find a 24 hr convenience store that sells oil but upon their return, they have missed the procession and the doors to the wedding feast are locked. The unwillingness to share seems to contradict other parables Jesus told. I wonder if there's a reason they cannot share? And then there's the door closing to the wedding feast, leaving the five foolish ones outside. What's up with that? And then I remember that I am not the judge, only God is. Whether we like these things or not, they happen. There is a note of finality in this parable. Windows close. Chances fade.

Time runs out. And while the harsh judgment is hard to swallow, it is still there. Maybe the doors lock against us when “opportunities to mend friendships, forgive the debt, break the habit, overcome the addiction, write the check, check the assumption, heal the wound, confront the injustice, embrace the church, release the bitterness...come to an end? We hate this, of course, so we tell ourselves it isn’t true. We tell ourselves that there’s always tomorrow. That we’ll get to it- whatever ‘it’ is- eventually. But what if this parable is inviting us to live as if each day- singular and fleeting- is all we have? Tomorrow- if it comes- will be its own gift, its own miracle, its own challenge” (Debie Thomas, www.journeywithjesus.net). Or maybe the “doors lock against us when we expect others to be prepared and accountable on our behalf, when we expect to ride in on the coattails of others’ goodness and readiness? Foolishness can also be failing to do our own inner work. What is foolish is to keep running on empty, and to look to others for the sustenance that only God can give directly, each one to each one. What if there is no admittance to the feast of love until we learn to care for, to take responsibility, for the flame in our own lives” (Kayla McClurg, *Passage by Passage*)?

And then there’s the oil. What does this oil that the wise bridesmaids seem to be unable to give away or share, represent? Some have suggested good works. However, none of the bridesmaids worked through the night, as they ALL slept. Maybe the oil symbolizes living a faith-filled life, even in the challenging times and times of waiting? The difference in this parable is that the wise ones were called “those who

were ready (v. 10). Ready for what? The bridegroom? No, they all were waiting on the bridegroom. The wise ones were prepared for the bridegroom's *delay*. What matters most is that when they are awakened, the wise ones are prepared for his arrival- in living a life of active and faithful discipleship. "The bridegroom, like the kingdom of heaven, did not arrive promptly; he was delayed, and some two thousand years later, the kingdom is still delayed" (Long).

This parable of the Ten Bridesmaids is, at its core, a parable about being vigilantly prepared, being ready for Christ's return. But not constant readiness, as like the bridesmaids, we all need sleep. The time of Jesus' return is unknown, and Scripture tells us that we must be ready by always living faithfully and obediently to Jesus' teaching. But the truth is...most of us have stopped waiting for Jesus' return and some of us may even doubt Jesus is coming back. The parable asks us to imagine ourselves as those who wait for the groom's return. You know the age-old promise that the Prophet Isaiah sees? A restored Israel, where human unfaithfulness has faded away, and is replaced by righteousness and praise (61:10-11). "This is the wedding the bridesmaids await. Another voice, John of Patmos, proclaims the promise this way: "See, the home of God is among mortals. God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes and death will be no more" (Rev. 21:3-4) (Susan Hylen, workingpreacher.org). As followers of Christ, we are called to affirm our faith in the coming Christ. Doing so shows our trust that God is a God of justice and mercy. As people of faith, we're called to

maintain our lit lamps and live as children of the light in a very shadowed world while we wait.

My preaching professor, Anna Carter Florence, uses a simple illustration in her class about what is needed to be light of the world. She brings in an oil lamp, the kind with a wick and real oil in the bottom, as a visual aid and lights the wick. The class watches it burn, but she only puts a small bit of oil in that lamp, so it burns for a few moments and then goes out. She asks the students: What happens when the oil runs out? Your light goes out. You have nothing to give, nothing to offer. The next question is true for her students and for us: Where do you find God each day? And as a child of God, where do you get the oil you need for your flask so you won't run dry? "When our light goes out, we have nothing left to give. The truth is that a pastor with no oil, a Christian with no oil, cannot be the light of the world for anybody, no matter how much they want to be." Then the future preachers all have a discussion about how daily prayer, Bible study, and communal worship and fellowship are crucial for a Christian's oil supply (Anna's sermon at Village Presbyterian Church). Let's face it. You can't get flask oil at the last minute—like at midnight when the bridegroom comes unexpectedly- no matter how fast Amazon delivers. And honestly this oil is not something you can borrow from someone else. You can't borrow someone else's peace of mind or inner strength or passion for God's justice. It is something that comes from keeping the faith and focus and from waiting intentionally—faithfully—joyfully—expectantly. "The wedding feast is our ideal, our goal, our destination. Without it, we have no

standard. No accountability. Nothing to lean into, nothing to anticipate as we labor in God's name. This parable ends with a wedding. It ends in celebration and joy. We dare not abandon the glorious ending simply because we've grown tired of waiting" (Thomas). "The bridesmaids who brought flasks of oil also brought hope that though the groom might be delayed; he would still arrive. In the end, they were ready not only for the wedding, but for the wait" (Aimee Moiso, *Connections*). So, as we wait together, let us keep our lamps trimmed and burning trusting that the love of God will continue to appear in our lives in surprising and unexpected ways and living in the hope that Christ will come again and come again, he will! Thanks be to God. Amen.