

*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.'" Matthew 25:1-13*

"Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour when the election results will be verified or accepted by all; when our nation will heal from division; when our fear and anxiety will subside.

What is it that is keeping you awake? I'm guessing for most of us lately, it's more likely to be the media than it is waiting for the return of Christ. And what sort of bridesmaids have we been in our waiting? In the wedding banquet that can be a metaphor for our own lives, what would Jesus have us understand? How is the Church called to wait?

The Gospel we just heard describes a wedding that is just a bit ridiculous. Obviously, there was no wedding planner to keep things running smoothly. This wedding is more than a bit unsettling. That the bridegroom, who is Jesus, would close the door to the five bridesmaids who did not have enough oil does not sound like the Jesus I know. What's going on here? This is the kind of biblical text that makes church people look bad.

Is this really how we define a wise person, as someone who only takes care of herself? Is this the kind of story we want people to identify with us? "Well, you know, those Episcopalians: they're the ones that hoard all their oil because they believe that if people are in need, it's their own darn fault." We know this is not the truth about Episcopalians. Generalizations and stereotypes like this are how rumors get started and why the church sometimes catches a bad rap.

This parable has challenged scholars throughout history and it maybe it challenges some things we believe about God. Maybe that's why Jesus told it. If being concerned only for yourself were the main message of the Gospel, what do we do with all the other things Jesus has been teaching in Matthew's Gospel? Because they would seem contradictory.

In the chapters before today's reading, Jesus has entered Jerusalem, his authority has been questioned, he has given them the greatest commandment, and he has denounced the religious authorities. In chapter 23 Jesus even says this, "But woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven." And in chapter 24 he tells them no one will know when the Son of Man will arrive, which suggests that the bridegroom might very well be late. Then here we are in chapter 25 where Jesus tells a parable about ten bridesmaids that appears to contradict his other teachings. How do we hear this as a story that is filled with God's grace?

Let's look a little more closely at this story Jesus tells. Part of the Jewish tradition of the time was that the bridegroom would come to the house of the bride's family where a big party was held and the marriage would be consummated. The task of the bridesmaids was to welcome the bridegroom when he arrived.

So, all ten of them arrive with burning lamps full of oil and they begin their vigil waiting for the bridegroom to come, only he was late. The time schedules of the ancient world were not like ours today. There were no google calendars or pop up reminders, but there might be pop up bandits on the roadside that could detain you. There was no Zoom, no livestreaming on YouTube if they missed the camel caravan to the wedding.

So the bridesmaids wait, and they wait, and they wait, and eventually all ten of them fall asleep. When the bridegroom finally draws near, they wake up and realize their lamps have gone out. This is where the story gets interesting, because five of the bridesmaids had brought extra oil and five had not. The five who had run out turn to the others and say, “please share, give us some oil for our lamps, to keep them burning.” But the wise ones say, “no, there is not enough to go around. No, we have ours and we are going to the wedding banquet.”

The example and behavior of the so-called wise ones is just plain wrong. There is almost an air of smug self-satisfaction as they go off to the party. We got in because we are wise. Do they not care about those who are in need? Those outside? Those who are excluded?

And the so-called foolish bridesmaids, what do they do? They don’t sit idly by and they don’t give up. They go and find oil, even in the middle of the dark night; but when they return to the house and knock on the door they are refused entrance. This is where the story gets difficult for me.

How does this fit with what Jesus teaches earlier in Matthew, chapter 7 when he says, “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” Inside the house there is a group who refused to do what Jesus taught – to share generously, and to welcome everyone. Outside is a group experiencing rejection, knocking on a door that Jesus said was supposed to open.

Now, we know that Jesus was a master storyteller, so I have to wonder if he was just thickening the plot here. Perhaps he wanted his audience to question him about this, and maybe if they had he would have answered them saying, “you open the door,” like he said to his disciples in chapter 14 when they had to feed the 5,000 people saying, “you give them something to eat.” Then Jesus sums up the parable with these perplexing words, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Notice that in the end Jesus does not mention the oil supply. Jesus does not talk about who is wise or who is foolish. No, Jesus knows there is enough oil for everyone and that we are all both wise and foolish. Instead, Jesus talks about those who fall asleep. And if you read further, in the very next chapter, Jesus’ disciples will do just that – they will fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane even after Jesus has asked them to stay awake with him.

Jesus asked the disciples and Jesus asks us to stay awake – to be ready for what is at hand, to watch for the bridegroom, and to look, not for any earthly ruler but for Christ. A few verses later in this same chapter, when they asked Jesus where it was that they would see him, his answer was this, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” This is what the Church is called to do as we wait and watch for Christ.

Here is the grace – we have all been invited to participate in the coming of the kingdom. Our neighbors will be there. The other political party will be there. Those who are both wise and foolish in this life will be there. The disorganized and the perfectionists, those who have been generous and those who have been fearfully stingy will all be there together, healed of all division, receiving the generous love of God.

In the meantime, perhaps Jesus is asking us, as the Church, to open our door to those who knock, to be the light of Christ in a dark world, to share the oil of our abundance, and to welcome everyone into the kingdom.

Amen.