



# “Another Wedding, Another Problem”

Text: Matthew 25:1-13

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We know of only one wedding that Jesus attended. According to John’s gospel, that wedding was in Cana of Galilee and there was a problem with the wine and Jesus took care of it. I don’t know if that was a traumatic event for our Lord - heaven knows there have been and will be plenty of weddings with traumatic events - but Jesus continued to use the motif of a wedding celebration in his parables and not necessarily in good ways.

A couple of weeks ago, we had a parable of a wedding banquet that had been lavishly prepared and the guests didn’t show up. The servants of the banquet host were sent into the highways and byways to fill the banquet hall with whomsoever they could find. One poor fellow showed up improperly dressed and was thrown out. Another wedding - another problem.

Now here we are at another wedding celebration and something is wrong. Half of the bridesmaids are unprepared for the groom’s arrival - they have no oil for their lamps - and they end up being locked out of the reception. This may sound farcical, but stranger things have happened at weddings and if you want to hear some, track me down after the service. Another wedding - another problem.

This kingdom parable, like the others we have considered, is strange. Part of that is because of cultural customs that are different than our own. Part of it is that we are not particularly fond of the underlying subject matter. And part of it is that we’re simply getting tired of Lent.

So, we’re off to another wedding reception this morning. Fasten your seatbelts.

The story begins with “The Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.” Now, let’s start by clarifying a few things. The word translated “virgin” simply means “young woman.” It has nothing to do with sexual experience.

Second, wedding celebrations in Jesus’ time went on for several days. Feasting and celebrating approached riotous levels. It began early in the morning and went until late at night and for more than one day.

Now, something kept this wedding reception from happening on time. Nothing new there. Maybe the pictures took longer than was expected. Maybe the caterer was running behind. Maybe there was a parking problem. Another wedding - another problem.

But at this wedding reception, the bridegroom was late. No explanation is given. That should be a clue.

As the sun was going down, and the groom was still absent, the bridesmaids made preparation. We are told that five of the the corps were “foolish” and five were “wise.” Silly and sensible bridesmaids. Another wedding - another problem.

The foolish, or silly, bridesmaids took nearly empty lamps - lamps without sufficient oil. The wise, or sensible bridesmaids, took their lamps and extra flasks of oil. Who knows when the bridegroom will show up. Better to be ready.

Time passed. The foolish young women ran out of oil. The wise young women had plenty and their lamps burned brightly. The foolish said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil.” “No way,” say the wise. “Go buy your own.”

Maybe the twenty-four hour Target was closed. The new “Oil ‘R’ Us” hadn’t opened. But it took them some time to track down additional oil.

While the search for more oil was going on, the Bridegroom arrived. The banquet hall was filled and the door was closed and locked. The foolish young women finally arrived, fully illuminated, but are denied entry into the wedding banquet. The master of the feast says chilling words, “I don’t know you.”

And that’s where the story ends.

What’s going on here? What is Jesus trying to tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven in this parable?

It’s pretty clear that, in the first case, this is a parable intended to remind us that the Kingdom of Heaven will come at a time that is unexpected and unforeseen. In the terms of a more fundamentalist Christianity, we are talking about the second return of Christ. Immediately preceding this parable in Matthew’s gospel, we read the words: “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only...therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (Matt. 24:36, 44). It is simply impossible that this parable - in the first instance - can be about anything other than the coming of Jesus at the end of time and the establishment of the eternal and complete Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Our parable lines out nicely with the teaching that precedes it. The wise young women are those believers who live their lives in a state of preparedness. They are the disciples of Jesus who have adopted the Coast Guard motto as their own: *Semper Paratus* - always ready. The foolish young women are those disciples who go about life without much interest in the responsibilities that Jesus taught us to be aware of. The Bridegroom - Jesus - is delayed and remember, please, that in the early church, they expected Jesus to return quickly. 2,000 years later, we're still waiting. The marriage feast reminds us of life at the eternal banquet God has prepared. It's all there. You can't miss it.

But let's go at it at just a little deeper level. Let's consider those young women who are labeled "foolish." Now, let's be clear: there's nothing sexist about that label. Go back to the book of Proverbs, in the Hebrew Bible, and the writer treats Wisdom and Folly as two women, calling out to people to follow in their way. In this parable, Jesus gives these these two ways of life further personification.

The parable is a story that invites us to consider which path we would rather follow. Which means that this parable is not just a story about the end of time. It's also about how we choose to live this life of discipleship.

We can claim to be disciples and not live in any way that might be considered as "new life." Lots of people do it. Just this last week, in my home state of Pennsylvania, a Christian state representative stood up and prayed the most horrifying and toxic prayer you can imagine on the day when the very first Muslim woman representative was being sworn in. There was no doubt the woman was a "Christian." She used Jesus' name at least thirteen times. But she did not represent Jesus very well that day.

As you read your way through Matthew's gospel, up to the point of our parable for the morning, Matthew gives us some pretty clear indications of what it means to live in a state of readiness. Matthew understood Jesus to be telling us that it is just as important what you do as what you believe. Matthew understood Jesus to be telling us that good works were important. But Matthew also understood Jesus to be telling us that abstaining from bad behavior, loving our enemies, loving our sisters and brothers within the community of faith, forgiving others for the wrongs they have done, possessing an unhesitating faith, living in loyalty to Christ before all others, and loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength were also part of living as disciples of Jesus.

And that means, for us, that Christianity is not all about dogmas and doctrines. It is not enough to intellectually understand and accept the teachings of Jesus. It's not enough to think the right thoughts. It's not even enough to be the ubiquitous "nice person" which seems to be a highly sought after label these days.

Being Christian is a way of living. It is a way of life that runs in utter opposition to the way of life being pursued by those devoted to the ways of the world. It is a way of life that holds all things as sacred because they were created by God and treats all people as equals because they are created in the image of God. It is a way of life that is lived in a mindful awareness of the needs of others all around. It is a way of life that sees the systemic injustice in which the poor are condemned to live. It is a way of life that sees the insidious cancer of white supremacy and calls it out. It is a way of life that is sensitive to the needs of those who live everyday with disabilities and seeks to make those lives richer and fuller. It is a way of life that lives in truth and practices truth-telling. It is a way of life that refuses to be controlled by fear. It is a way of life that seeks to bring people together in the light of God's goodness and love.

And it means that we live in a state of readiness, for we do not know when Christ will return, for sometimes he returns as one of the poor, or the person battered and beaten, or the one denied the connections in life which bring joy and happiness, or the person who is victimized because they wield little or no power. Sometimes Christ returns in the form of the hungry, or the thirsty, or the naked, or the imprisoned, or ... well, that's for next week.

This is the way of wisdom. This is living in a way that honors God and proclaims Christ. This is a way of life that never allows us to be caught unprepared. This is a way of life that recognizes that all around us, every day, are opportunities to see the way of God put into action and celebrated.

Lessons learned:

1. Always have enough oil.
2. Always be ready.
3. Always watch for invitations to help the Kingdom of Heaven break in.
4. Always put faith into action.
5. Always be aware that if it's another wedding, it's another problem.

Be wise, my friends. For now and evermore. Amen.



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