

Matthew 25:1-13  
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I began this week not being a very big fan of this parable of the 10 bridesmaids. At first glance it feels selfish, harsh, and a little mindboggling. I didn't like how the groom gets to decide unilaterally which latecomers get into the reception. And the lessons, seem almost offensive to our faithful sensibilities.

The lessons seem go something like this: You must always be prepared with more than you think you will need, others are not going to help you or share with you, and if you aren't prepared you don't get in... in fact you won't even be recognized.

We who claim to have a heart for the underdog, always pulling for the vulnerable, the lonely, the marginalized, the outcast, and the oppressed... we who see ourselves in those busy bridesmaids who were running late and a little short of oil... well our hearts break to think Jesus could tell a story where the 'haves' don't share, and God's grace is absent from those who are a little late.

One part of me says, "Thank you Jesus" that this is not the only parable he tells about the Kingdom of heaven. There's the woman who sweeps her entire house looking for one lost coin, the Samaritan who helps the beaten man on the road, the loving father who welcomes back the prodigal child, and the Mustard seed which grows into a tree which becomes a shelter for all. Maybe remembering these can help us swallow one parable we may not like?

Yet, as we consider the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids it is important to note this is not a story about personal finances or generosity. It is about preparing ourselves for life's unexpected times; the unscheduled and unscripted moments of life.

We find the foolish in our story have fulfilled their basic duty. They have met the established standards. They have carefully calculated their busy personal lives to be sure they had just enough time to fill their lamps, so when the time came for the wedding the lamp would be ready. They lived as though the coming of the bridegroom were a periphery event, not in any way central to their lives in the days leading up to the wedding.

The 'wise' in our story have taken a different course of preparation. They are not calculating how to meet minimum standards... they have fundamentally re-oriented parts of their busy lives to prepare for the moment the bridegroom would come. They acquired oil, filled their lamps, found their flasks and filled them too. They imagined the joy of that moment the bridegroom would come; they pictured the light their lamp would provide in the dark night. They made the coming of the bridegroom a very important event in the days leading up to the wedding.

New Testament Scholars tell us this parable is about the second coming of Jesus. Our branch of the Christian tree doesn't talk about the second coming very often. But, after Jesus' death many believed Christ would return immediately... perhaps before the Packer game kicks off today. This immediate return would fulfill the words we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." Christ would return and all problems, all wars, all hatred, all sin would be vanished literally creating heaven on earth. Christ's followers were to be ready for this moment through a deep reorientation of their life to all things faithful; practicing forgiveness, loving their enemy, offering compassion, welcoming the stranger, and being fully devoted to God.

When the gospel was written, Christ's "second coming" had been delayed several generations. During the delay the early church began to debate how, when, and even if Christians needed to continue to be prepared for the second coming. Some concluded as long as they were minimally prepared, well... they had busy lives to get on with; responsibilities to provide for their family, produce for their employer, fix their homes, shuffle their children around, get the car repaired, attend PTA meetings, and on and on. They were too busy to dedicate every waking moment to Christ's return, which seemed less and less likely each passing day. They had stuff to do in a beautiful but imperfect world.

Others in the ancient world, while readily admitting the passing decades made it less clear when Christ would return; still clung to the idea that in every moment of life, one is to be as ready as possible to meet Jesus. They continued to practice a constant state of readiness.

The parable invites us to reflect on a question, in the midst of our very busy lives, how do we prepare to welcome the presence of God? Do we calculate how we can "fit" God into our busy lives? Or are we actively reorienting our daily life, so we can give as much of ourselves as possible to welcome Christ anywhere, anytime he appears?

Is our faith another thing on the "to do" list, or are we ready to allow God to permeate every moment of our day and night. God wants to make a difference in us, and through us. And if we think about it, are we not provided hundreds, maybe thousands of opportunities a day to allow God into our thoughts, our conversations, our emails, our tweets.

I don't see this parable as a call to do more, I see it as a call to to be more. In a book titled, Christian Caregiving: A Way of Living, chapter 7 teaches how to have daily encounters with others which touch Spiritual depths. Author Kenneth C. Haugk and William J. McKay write, "Just as individuals need encouragement to express their feelings and needs in other areas of life, they also need encouragement to talk about their Spiritual needs."

We often naturally ask questions like, "how are things going? Or How are you doing?" The authors want to prepare you to take casual encounters to a deeper level. Examples of practical questions during a conversation might be, "Do you see yourself as a religious or spiritual person? How do you see God fitting into your life, or into the situation you described to me?"

How is that affecting your view of God?" Even a question like, "What values are important to you?" can invite a deeper encounter and further reorient us to Christ.

We don't have to do more, we can be more right in the places where we already are... Be more prepared for the kin-dom opportunities God places before us each day. We can help welcome Christ as we sit by another parent at a soccer game, at a dance lesson, at a music recital. We can help manifest Christ at work, in our family, in our apartment complex and neighborhood. We don't have to set up a program or start another project and we certainly don't need another committee!! We just need some oil, some training, some inspiration, some courage to help welcome the presence of Christ out in that great big world we live in each day.

We are told in the gospels that God's realm is already among us. It's not complete, but it is present and powerful. We can light our lamps and be a part of it in and through our everyday lives and the encounters which naturally happen.

I think, maybe I see the value in this parable now!

Pope Francis is quoted saying, "The bridegroom is the Lord, and the time of waiting for his arrival is the time he gives us, to all of us, before his final coming... it is a time of watchfulness; a time in which we must keep alight the lamps of faith, hope and charity, a time in which to keep our hearts open to goodness, beauty, and truth... What he asks of us is to be ready for the encounter... ready for an encounter, for a beautiful encounter, the encounter with Jesus, which means being able to see the signs of his presence, keeping our faith alive with prayer, with the sacraments, and taking care not to fall asleep so as to not forget about God... Let us not fall asleep."

Amen