

It's Like This...

A sermon given by the Reverend Casey W. FitzGerald on November 6, 2011, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, on the Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Focus Text: Matthew 25:1-13

'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.

I'll admit...it's that closed door that gets me every time. It's the coldness of the Lord's response—*I don't even know you*—that throws me off—that seems to paralyze the sermon writing part of my brain (if there is one). Too many Christians have used such kingdom texts to preach fire and brimstone—to talk about who's in and who's out—to focus on God's judgment, which will somehow "vindicate" the faithful. It seems there is no room for grace in this text. As homiletician Anna Carter Florence writes, "The story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids is not a text for the faint-hearted. It's scary and damning and irrevocable, as stories about the end of the world have a tendency to be. It has terrible characters (those smarmy bridesmaids!) and disturbing plot developments (Jesus the gate-keeping troll?!)." (I wanted noted in both the heavenly and sermon record that the troll bit was Ms. Florence's, not my own.)

I've avoided this parable for a long time. In fact, when Paul Stetsenko asked me for my preaching text for this Sunday, I said, "I'm not sure...but I'm *definitely not* using the parable of the bridesmaids!"

You might remember that earlier, in thirteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel, the disciples came and asked him, 'Why do you speak to [the crowds] in parables?' What they're really asking is: why don't you just say what you mean? Jesus tells them "to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." He continues, "The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'" (Matthew 13:10-13)

When I read the parable of the ten bridesmaids, I feel not so much like one of those insider disciples—much more like one of those unlucky crowd members—to whom the secrets of the kingdom have most definitely NOT been given. This parable is the kind that makes me wonder if, for lack of understanding, I'll be staring up in bewilderment at the shut door with the other 4 bridesmaids. I get the parable of the prodigal son and the loving father, I get the shepherd's search for that one lost sheep, the parable of the Good Samaritan...we all love that one...but this tale of judgment and exile vexes me. (I'm not saying it's easy to live up to the standards set forth by those texts, but they are certainly more palatable to consider.)

As I said, I've avoided this passage in my own scriptural study for a long time.

But, when it comes to choosing preaching texts, I have this terrible habit of eventually picking the text I'm least comfortable with from the lectionary selections. Some part of me knows that I can get the most out of the bothersome texts...the texts that agitate me...the texts that make me want to run away and finally live my dream of fronting a bad bar band...or just getting more sleep on Saturday nights...because when I fight them, when I rail against them...those are the times when I feel the most engaged and connected with the Word...which I suppose is Jesus' objective in the first place.

And I've come to believe that part of the reason Jesus used parables was because "getting it" is understanding that our understanding is LIMITED. It's not that the disciples suddenly had full knowledge of the kingdom...that they knew the particulars and could be guided by them. Mystery still abounds. But, you see, some people really do believe that this sort of omnipotence can be attained. The Pharisees and others who were bent on knowing/owning God's truth wanted exact understanding, but the disciples would have to deal with mystery. Jesus said he spoke in parables because he didn't want everyone to get it. Maybe it was because he wanted us to know we couldn't get it and get BEYOND that need.

Jesus said, "it's LIKE this"... not "it IS this," for a reason. Maybe that reason is that we won't get bogged down in the details...in trying to decipher some sort of eschatological code. We won't spend hours, weeks, years, centuries and millennia trying to dissect and figure out the exact nature of Jesus' meaning in the text. Instead, we WILL...engage with that which makes us uncomfortable, try to grasp the heart/core of his message...and make it our life's attempt to say YES to Jesus' call.

So, here we are...wonderfully stuck together with the parable of the ten bridesmaids. Together, trusting that the Jesus who spoke this parable is the same Jesus who proclaims that the foolish will be made wise, the same Jesus who looks for that one lost sheep, the same Jesus who somehow feeds thousands from 5 measly fish and an equally low number of loaves. Together, we move into the parable itself.

The kingdom of heaven is like this: Ten bridesmaids—five foolish and five wise— took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. The wise brought flasks of oil to refill their lamps—the foolish did not. But the bridegroom is delayed (weddings were long, not so

punctuality focused as our American weddings are today)...so the bridegroom has not yet arrived to take the maids to the party. They all get drowsy and sleep. Finally, at midnight, a shout awakens them. “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” All of them get up and trim their lamps. The foolish five ask the wise ones for some spare oil...their lamps are going out.

The wise refuse—there is not enough to go around. *Go out and get some yourselves.* While the foolish ones are gone, the bridegroom comes. The wise maids are taken to the party. The foolish ones miss his arrival.

Upon their return (presumably without extra oil—could there really have been extra oil places open at midnight?), the foolish maids call out: “Lord, lord, open to us.” But the bridegroom denies even knowing them. The door is shut. Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Though limited in our understanding, there are still many things to focus on in what has become for me a very rich text. So, I ask you to bear with me as I set before you a few observations through which we might draw closer to God’s kingdom. (I have added section titles for your listening pleasure.)

1) *What Time is It?*

For Matthew (who is the only Gospel writer who includes this parable), a big concern was the delayed second coming. People were wondering if it was ever going to happen. They were, perhaps getting complacent. The kingdom parables in Matthew largely focus on the notion that we do not know *when* the end is coming, but that we should not get sidetracked and complacent as we wait. It is coming and we should be prepared. This quandary about the delay of Christ speaks directly to our 21st century ears. We are now so far removed from Jesus’ original appearance on earth, that I would guess we seldom think about what it will be like when he comes again. A question before us might be—how do we restore a sense of urgency and vigilance? How do we acknowledge that what we do today—what we do each and every day—matters?

The 5 foolish bridesmaids are suddenly faced with a loss that they had clearly not anticipated. The bridegroom is gone and they are at a loss for what to do next. They did not know when he would come. They were not prepared. Some of us can connect deeply to this aspect of the story in reflecting upon missed opportunities surrounding death and end of life situations. A hearer of this text might first wonder: what needs to be said and done with the people around me—that if I/they died tomorrow—I would have put forth my best with those relationships? How much more important, then is this question: how do I put forth my whole self, my best, to be in relationship with the God who might come at any moment?

We do not know the day or hour. So, what do you need to get done?

2) *The Ins and the Outs of the Kingdom*

Though in this parable 5 wise bridesmaids enter the wedding (and presumably the kingdom of heaven) and 5 foolish bridesmaids are shut out, I do not believe this text is primarily about determining who is in and who is out. This text was not given to us so that we might have special knowledge of who will make it into the party and who will not. Talk of who is in and out is unhelpful at best and extremely hurtful at worst. What we might actually glean from this part of the parable is that, by and large, it is difficult to determine whether or not WE could be counted among the wise or the foolish.

We would also do well to remember that all the bridesmaids were invited to the wedding...and all of them accepted the initial invitation. They showed up! This parable, therefore, is not about separating the church and un-church—but about our varying levels of faithfulness within the church itself. This parable was given to the disciples alone (it was not one preached in front of a crowd)—it is an insiders' conversation.

3) *Preparedness: A State of Being, not a Decision*

On the surface, the 10 bridesmaids are all doing the same thing. They have all come to the wedding party. They are all there to witness to the union. They all bring oil lamps. They all get drowsy and fall asleep. But then, there is something different. The foolish don't have what it takes to get them through the long haul. They assumed what they had was enough. The wise maids did not. In that moment of the bridegroom's arrival, they could not make a quick decision to have enough oil—they were supposed to have prepared for that before. They needed to be prepared for that EVERY day...because they didn't know at what time the bridegroom would arrive. Filling our oil lamp is not a once-and-for-all decision, but it is an agreement to be in a process as a follower of Jesus Christ. It is not one good work done, one pledge given, one mission trip attended, but something deeper. On the surface, it may look like we in the church are all doing the same thing—but Jesus says we are not.

Now, some of you may hear this and be discouraged. You may feel disconnected from your God. You may perceive the door to already be shut. To you I say, take heart—for you who assume you might not have access to the kingdom, you may well be the wise bridesmaids who goes the extra mile to ensure she is prepared. Again, it is impossible to determine who we are in this text.

The important question is this: how do we live in a state of getting ready?

4) *The Oil Worth Fighting For. (Un-shareable and Expendable)*

What has really burned me about the text is the response of the supposedly wise bridesmaids to the oil-seeking maids—I've been annoyed that they seem to be operating out of the assumption that there is just not enough oil to go around. What happened to the loaves and fishes? When did Jesus ever operate out of a

not-enough mentality? But what I am coming to see is that this oil probably represents that which *cannot* be given away.

For many interpreters, the oil represents Christ's light shining within the bridesmaids. Presumably, the wise ones have spent more of their lives cultivating this light—this relationship with Christ. Such a thing cannot be just handed over. It cannot be bought, or fixed with a special pill, a self-help book, or someone else wishing it enough for you...one cannot run out for oil at midnight when the bridegroom is ready to start the processional to the wedding.

The oil is non-transferable.

For example: You'll recall part of Jesus' most important commandment...that we would love our neighbor as ourselves. You can't make me love myself more...you can't make me love my neighbor more...you can exhibit to me what that love looks like...but unless I choose to engage and cultivate such a love, it can never be mind. Such a thing is non-transferable. The oil represented something that couldn't be given over. According to one author, "In Matthew's Gospel, [those tasks which keep your oil supply filled] include bearing witness to God's kingdom by welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned (25:31-46), and making disciples in all the world (28:19-20)."ⁱⁱ

The oil is expendable.

Oil burns out. In order to show Christ's light for others, we must tend to our own spiritual needs. It's not all about what you give away—it's also about what you are taking in. Those of us in the church who are constantly looking for folks to volunteer, to serve, worry about burnout. We would not need to be as worried if we could somehow ensure that your oil stock was being replenished.

So, how are you keeping your oil lamps filled?

5) *I'm Pretty Sure You're Foolish. I am too.*

Though, as I've said, it's unhelpful to think about who's in and who's out—if you have to place yourself somewhere—why not with the foolish bridesmaids? The truth is, all the bridesmaids were a bit foolish...it's just that the wise self-identified as such. The wise bridesmaids knew they would have to spend their lives replenishing their lamps. So, each day, for the sake of growth, let us imagine ourselves as the foolish bridesmaids—not that we would be discouraged by the shut door—but that we would do everything in our lives to be engaged with the God who opens it.

And, in the end, may we who are foolish be made wise through Christ.

Amen.

ⁱ Carter Florence, Anna. <http://www.goodpreacher.com/shareit/readreviews.php?cat=28>

ⁱⁱ Works, Carla. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=11/6/2011&tab=4