

Lent 4 2019

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Narrative Lectionary

Psalm 43:2-4
Matthew 25:1-13

Grace and peace to you from Christ.

Ten bridesmaids sounds like a wedding disaster waiting to happen! This passage seems to have “doomsday” written all over it as we hear of ill prepared people, some who refuse to share, tardy grooms and a shortage of oil! (Only in Alberta would we catch that part of the reading!)

Matthew’s parable of the 10 bridesmaids is challenging, because at first read its lesson seems contrary to the good news we expect. We would far sooner hear some version of “Jesus loves me.” Even the most basic Sunday School or kindergarten lessons teach that we should share with others, be nice, don’t dawdle. Confronted with a story like this is a good reminder of just how important it is to delve deeply into the Bible, because that’s how we uncover a better understanding.

So let’s dive in! We know that something more is happening under the surface here. I remind you that this story is a *parable*, which means there is truth in it, but at the same time it isn’t *literally* true.

To set some context here, in the previous chapter (24:3) Jesus was asked the question, “when will the end of the age come?” Which was a big question on everyone’s mind and a key to understanding this parable. Jesus answers that question by saying no one knows the time with the day or the hour and he describes a long list of disasters and terrible events that will be a sign of the end. There will be wars and rumors of wars, famines, the sun won’t shine – that kind of thing – pretty scary stuff. Yet even with this description, we realize that there is no practical or concrete or tangible way to figure out when that time would come. We just don’t and cannot know... and then, Jesus tells this story of the bridesmaids.

Which tells us that this story has nothing to do with the wedding planning. And it actually even has nothing to do with being prepared for some future apocalyptic event. What it’s really about is living faithfully in the moment.

Jumping to verse 13, the very last, which says, “So stay awake, for you don’t know the day or the hour.” “Stay awake,” in Greek comes from the word “gregoreo,” and like any translation the English doesn’t quite capture what it means. It certainly doesn’t mean to physically stay awake which would be an

impossibility (even in this story all 10 bridesmaids fall asleep at one point.) The word *gregoreo* is a verb, which means it's action orientated. It's something to be doing. And secondly, it doesn't just mean to "not sleep," but to be vigilant or to stay watchful and attentive to avoid distraction, or we might say, to stay focused on the task at hand.

So the problem here isn't that the wise bridesmaids have lots of oil and the foolish bridesmaids did not. As one theologian (Elizabeth Johnson) describes, *perhaps their problem is rather that at that critical moment when they were to welcome the bridegroom, [the foolish bridesmaids] had abandoned their posts. They were foolish because they acted as if their primary job was to have oil in their lamps, when this was only a means to an end. Their primary job was to welcome the bridegroom and accompany the bridal party with joy. Because they got distracted with secondary concerns they missed the bridegroom's arrival and missed out on the party.*¹

Sorry fellow Albertans, oil isn't everything! In this story, the end time wasn't everything, oil wasn't everything – the bridegroom – who represents Jesus, is. And we know well that we are easily distracted from the work of faith.

Distractions abound. I remember when I was a child sometimes my parents would say things like "don't take candy from strangers," or "don't talk to strangers." But the point wasn't really about never talking to someone you didn't know; the point was staying safe and sometimes that necessitated talking to strangers.

In church we get distracted at times – there's many famous church fights that we hear about over odd things. I know one church that had a huge and ongoing argument over whether they should seed or sod their new lawn. But when we step back we understand that this type of thing isn't the point of being a church.

Or like this story from Matthew, we might become fanatical about an approaching end time. We might imagine a day in which Jesus returns and the good are "raptured" into heaven and the rest remain. Some theologians even argue on this basis that we do not need to worry about the environment, because the sooner the world is destroyed, the sooner the end time comes, the better.

Then there's the problem of complacency. We wonder, if Jesus isn't going to come anytime soon, then is there really any urgency to the ministry we have

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3871

been given? Impatient with waiting, many have left the fold of faith to pursue what the world has to offer.

The bridesmaid parable calls us to reflect on the way we live day to day as God's people, not whether we will measure up at some end moment. It's the basic practices of faithful living help to keep us on track. I'll be the first to say that it's not always glamorous, but everyday, regular things such as coming to church, reading the Bible, talking with God in prayer all go a long way in reminding us of the world's need for good news and that we have a role to play in sharing it.

There will always be people who need to hear the gospel, there will always be hungry people to feed, no day goes by without a stranger who needs welcome or a sick person who needs care, a lonely person in need of company – and these kinds of things are the work, the ministry, that is entrusted to us. This is the work that helps us to keep our priorities clear. This is the work that reminds us there is no need to run off at midnight in search of oil, but Christ has already come into the world.

Now, as we learn to steer away from all that wants to distract us (and we have to learn this over and over again) then we see clearly the invitation we have been given to be with Christ, even today. There is no need to wait for celebrations to begin, because they have already. We can come and join in with oil in our lamps or when we have run dry.

Stay focussed O people of God! Watch and wait to catch opportunities for love and compassion, be prepared with word and wine, take time to enjoy the wedding party! Amen.