

March 31, 2019
No Darkness So Dark
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Matthew 25:1-13

[The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids]

25 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ 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.’ ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The trouble with myths, according to G. K. Chesterton, is the temptation to confuse them with the reality to which they are trying to point. A portrait of Queen Anne is one of his examples. *It is not her*, he wrote, *no matter how perfectly it captures her posture and expression. It can never be her* – which is useful for thinking about parables too. Especially the ones we hate, like this week’s and last.

The kingdom of God is among you, Jesus said, and yet *kingdom of heaven* is as far removed from our lives and Jesus’ first hearers as Queen Anne was from Chesterton’s. It can be tempting to imagine that she really looked like the portrait. Or that Bible times really looked like coloring book pages. *Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this*, Jesus said – *but ought not be confused with this*, I wish he’d also said – and is definitely NOT to be confused with what you know of the world already.

Let’s pray: *Could it really be, O God, that you’d have us think of ourselves as married to you? Asked to trust your promises to have and hold us forever? In sickness and in health? For richer and for poorer? If so, then we are going to need your help, O God, in not confusing what we’ve known so far with what you are asking now. Our vision is poor and we are foolish. We pray for faith to stay faithful, to want what you want us to have. Amen.*

Matthew 25 opens with Jesus commuting between Bethany and Jerusalem every day (rather like being back and forth between Unionville and Bloomington), within a few weeks of Passover and the palm branch parade, Jesus preaching his heart out to anyone willing to listen. Wooing them, seducing them, tempting them to give themselves entirely to him. Entrust themselves to him, body and soul. Their past, their present, their future. Entrust themselves to his promise that he already loved them – they didn't have to earn it; that he'd already saved them – they had nothing to fear. Trust and trust and trust alone. They had to learn to trust him. Trust the promise. Body and soul. Awake and asleep. Every moment. Every day. Forever.

How to live now, in this world, as we will live then and there in the kingdom of heaven – with parables Jesus explained what this life looks like. Like a wedding, for example, a wedding to which the groom was really, really, really late. In those days, the wedding guests gathered at the bride's family's house and waited for the groom to come and fetch her. Then they all processed to his house for the wedding celebration, the feast, which lasted for many days. Our traditional wedding ceremonies are reduced versions of this ancient practice.

The Greek says "*he was delayed*" or "*he tarried.*" Night came. The guests went to sleep. They slept for hours. He finally showed up in the middle of the night. And then, rather than wait until daylight, he wants the wedding to go on immediately, have all his guests travel in the dark. None of which makes any sense at all, mind you. But it is not the groom who is foolish, of course. No, it's the women, the bridesmaids, the five who realize their lamps have burned out. No more oil. They try to borrow some from the five wise girls who tell them, "*Sorry. You'll have to find a dealer if you want to buy more.*" They are fools, remember, so they go.

The groom, THE REASON for being together, THE ONE they have all gathered to meet, FOR WHOM they have all waited all along, finally arrives. And the first thing these five do is panic. The second is ask for help from people with no help to give. The third is run away from the groom. What is the big thing Jesus wants people to hear? to do? *Give me your whole self. Give me your whole life. Give me your future. Trust every moment, every event, every sorrow, every joy, every fear, every problem, entirely to me. Trust me to deal with it lovingly, trust me to know and to do what is best for you, no matter what.*

Yet, the foolish girls in his story did what? They turned away. They turned to the dealers of the world to provide what they really didn't need anyway, if following the groom was their goal. Weren't there plenty of other people on the same journey carrying light? More importantly, wasn't the groom himself there to show them the way? Why didn't they stay?

The church reading and hearing this gospel for the first time was about thirty years old, filled with disciples who had been led to believe by Paul and the other apostles that Jesus would be back really soon to take the church to heaven with him. Thirty years was long enough for the old ones to start dying, to “*fall asleep*” as the New Testament often calls dying. They were tired of waiting – and worried. Their understanding of the gospel, of discipleship, didn’t accommodate such long delays. Into their waiting, Matthew resurrects this wedding parable.

Have you ever waited so long for an inevitable bad thing to happen that, when it finally did, it felt kind of good just to have it over with? I’ve a friend who hated being pregnant so much she thought childbirth felt wonderful. Have you ever waited so long for some inevitable good thing to happen that, when it finally happened, it felt bad? Or disappointing? I’ll let you think about it for a minute.

Even in his presence, in the midst of a celebration funded by the groom, to which they were all invited and welcome and wanted, five girls believe they need to DO SOMETHING else to be included. They didn’t trust the groom. They didn’t trust the groom’s plan. They DID ask their friends to share. But think about it. Do the math. There still wouldn’t have been any additional light, right?

Why was the groom so late? Only the groom knows. Therein, friends, is the essence of trust, isn’t it? Of faith? Of discipleship? Basing our words, our decisions, our attitudes and our expectations on promises, without the benefit of complete information. We simply don’t get to know all we want to know, like the time and date God is going to show up and fix this or that situation. Jesus said to everyone who would – and WILL – listen, “*Trust me. With all that you are and all that you have. Forever.*” And either we do or we don’t.

And the ones who do, the disciples, the ones who do show up, even we get sleepy and tired, and grumpy and doubtful. And we fail. Repeatedly. Everyone. Positively everyone screws up eventually. He loses his keys. She misses a meeting. She forgets to make an important call. He says hurtful things. She mooches off other people’s time and stuff. They fail to prepare. They oversleep. Even the wise girls slept. Suggesting that, as much as I wish otherwise, wisdom is not, in fact, the same as punctuality and preparedness. If the wise girls had been **really wise** wouldn’t they have anticipated the needs of others? Wouldn’t they have wanted to do whatever they could to make sure everyone was included?

The thing is, friends, I’m just not sure how to preach about Jesus’ second coming. I believe in it. I expect it. But it’s not on my mind all the time. I don’t wake up hoping it’s today – or dreading it either. But what do I know, friends, is that every person is waiting for something, waiting for God to show up, or do something, or

stop doing something, to accomplish something or end something. And some people have waited a long time. Others have waited a long, long, long, long time. And some have waited longer than they ever imagined a person might ever have to wait, longer than seems compassionate or decent, if God is good and loving.

And while it's tempting to equate wisdom with being organized and prepared, maybe – honestly – it's more about trust. Trust that takes the shape of being patient and present. Trust that understands the real reward of being patient is greater patience, the capacity to wait even longer – in confidence that what is promised IS what will be, and will be in God's time, for God's reasons. Trust that does not give up on God and turn to the world for what the world MAY promise, but will never deliver.

The foolish girls finally arrived at the wedding, only to discover they'd missed it. Now they were the ones who were too late. *"I never knew you,"* the groom said to them – which sounds horrible, but to whom? Not to the ones who had stayed close to him. They were on the dance floor, or in the buffet line. Does he mean, *"I've never seen you before. You were always somewhere else, doing something else, trying to make something else work because you thought I wasn't coming"?*

Maybe the only ones to whom it sounds so terrible are the ones who didn't trust him, who turned away to look for light someplace else, who waited as long as they could stand to wait and then, for whatever reason, decided not to wait any longer. Maybe they came to believe the darkness was simply too dark, that he'd never find them in such darkness, so they had to help him find them, help him find his way to them. Maybe they were thinking *"Better to be busy at something than faithful at nothing."*

And maybe that's what made them most foolish of all, because maybe the very heart and soul of faith is doing nothing when there is nothing to do but wait and trust, to be patient and present, for as long as it takes for God to keep God's promises, confident that no time is too long, nor any darkness too dark, for God to find us, and love us, and carry us home.

Would you pray with me?