

Narrative Lectionary: Bridegrooms, March 31, 2019

Susan and I were remembering the other day that when we got married, we couldn't invite everybody we wanted to to the reception, because of limited space and a limited budget. But we had a great time because everybody chipped in. My guitar-playing brother formed a trio and we danced a lot. Family made a lot of the food. We had made our promises to each other earlier at the church, and then came the party.

In the time of Jesus, the couple made promises to each other at the time of betrothal. That was when they legally were married, but they weren't living together. You remember that when we meet Joseph and Mary they were engaged to be married. They were legally married, but weren't living together yet. So in Jesus' day, at some point the groom was ready to begin life together, and it was time for the wedding. This was the party, this was when the groom took his wife from her parent's home to his home, and everybody in the village was invited. There was a parade from her house all the way to his house, through the village, when all the attendants would walk with them.

If you were an attendant, the problem was you didn't know when the groom was going to fetch his wife. You only knew a general time frame. So the attendants had to be ready.

This story is at the end of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is in Jerusalem the last week of his life, and he tells stories about what the last days will look like. He tells stories about what final judgment will look like. In this parable Jesus says, The kingdom of heaven is like bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. The attendants had heard that the wedding was getting close. So they head towards the bride's home.

The lamps Jesus was talking about were rags that had been attached to a pole and soaked in oil. They were a pretty basic way to light your way through the village at night. Jesus says, Five of these maidens were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones didn't bring any extra oil with them. That wouldn't have been a problem, but the bridegroom was delayed. Was he getting cold feet? Did he not have the house painted yet? Anyway, he was late.

As they were waited for the groom to show up, all ten of the bridesmaids became drowsy and went to sleep. Then Jesus continues: 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. That means they needed to cut off the burned portion of the rag, add some new cloth, and refresh the oil.

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.” And then Jesus concludes with this warning: Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Jesus is telling a series of stories about the end of the age and the coming of the Son of Man. One of the themes is that the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour, and nobody knows when, and we need to be ready.

And if you’re not ready your foolish. In the story, the five bridesmaids were foolish because they didn’t have enough oil. They didn’t have what it took to be ready for the party. What Matthew probably means by that is they were lacking in good works. In Matthew, it’s the foolish man who builds his house on sand, not on the solid foundation of doing what Jesus says.

It’s in Matthew that Jesus says, Let your light so shine before others that they would see your good works. Being ready in Matthew’s Gospel means doing the will of God. “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

Now you observant Lutherans here will say, Wait a minute, it’s not about our works; it’s about God’s grace! You’re right. We don’t work our way into salvation. But as the book of James says, Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. He says, Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

Jesus gives the meaning of the parable in the last verse: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the hour nor the day.”

The Greek word translated “keep awake” can also be translated “be vigilant.” And yes, that means keep awake for the second coming of Christ. For 2,000 years we have been waiting for God to wrap up this segment of history, and we keep waiting. There are Christians who try to figure out when Christ will come again. They string together all kinds of Bible passages to predict when Christ will return and the Day of Judgment will come and God will create a new heaven and new earth. But remember Jesus says earlier in Matthew, “About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Matt. 24:36)

So in the meantime, what does it mean to be vigilant?

Matthew would say it means doing good works now. But it also means looking for Christ where he is hidden. Next week’s Gospel is about the final judgment, and what will Christ judge the world on? Where do we see the bridegroom Jesus? In the hungry and the homeless and the naked and the sick and the imprisoned. Our job is to have oil in our lamps and be ready to welcome them to the party, because we meet Christ in these folks. Christ is present in all creation, and in particular in those who struggle.

We are vigilant as we keep showing up and seeing the works that need to be done. We are vigilant as we tune in and see where the Spirit is at work. Our son Toby and I were talking basketball the other night, and he asked me if I knew who Nikola Jokic was for the Denver Nuggets. I said No, not yet. He said he is a big, slow, Euro-player who is an incredible passer. He just seems to know where the open guy is. He is one of the all-time great passing centers at the age of 24.

And Toby made this comment. He said, He lets the game come to him. He doesn’t force it. He seems to always know where the play is. I wonder if that isn’t a good analogy for being vigilant. We look for where the Spirit is at work, and we pass the ball there.

You know that’s been one of my themes this year. Just keep showing up. I showed up for a funeral the other day, the mother of one of our members. I always pray

when I go to an event that I will talk with the people I'm supposed to talk with. I parked my car across the street from the church, and I noticed a car pass me and head into the school parking lot right near me. It was Patty Johnson.

I've been wanting to check in on Patty to see how she is doing since she lost Fred. And what was that prayer I pray? Help me to connect with the people I'm supposed to connect with. So Patty and I walked in together and managed to sit together, and caught up on life. When you show up and are vigilant, you meet Christ. You meet the person you're supposed to meet. You see where the energy is and where to pass the ball to. Jesus says, Keep awake. I'm going to appear, not just at the end of history as we know it, but I'll appear throughout your day.

I found another interpretation to this parable this week. Maybe the problem with the foolish bridesmaids was not that they ran out of oil, but that they *abandoned their post*. Their job was to welcome the bridegroom. What if they had stayed with the other maidens? What if they had walked together with the wise maidens? What if it wasn't so much about the oil; what if it was about showing up, being there for the party, even without the oil lamps. They could have held hands with the other bridesmaids. They could have shouted their joy at the bridal couple. They could have been a part of the scene. But they left.

I don't know about you, but I find this parable difficult. There doesn't seem to be much grace in it. First of all, the five wise bridesmaids won't share the oil they have. That doesn't seem right, does it? Shouldn't they share what they have? But this is a parable. Maybe what it says is we can't borrow somebody else's good works. One of these days we will be asked to give an account of our lives. How did we do? And I won't be able to rely on my spouse or my children or my best friend. We don't earn our salvation according to our good works, but God will say, What did you do with what I gave you? So the bridesmaids don't share what they have, because in Matthew's account maybe that is our good works. We each are responsible for our own oil lamp.

Here's another thing: the ending is really difficult. There is no grace at the ending of the story, either. The five foolish bridesmaids arrive, but it's too late. The doors are closed and locked. In fact, the groom says, Truly I tell you, I do not know you.

Again, we are reminded of Jesus' words in Matthew 7: "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name? Then I will declare to them, I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers. (Matthew 7:21-23)

There doesn't seem to be any grace in this story. The wise bridesmaids don't show any mercy to the five foolish bridesmaids, and the groom, who was late, doesn't show any mercy to the five foolish bridesmaids. And apparently Jesus will say to people at the end of time, Too late. You should have decided for me before this.

Let me talk about two kinds of justice. The kind of justice Matthew's Jesus talks about is retributive justice. Retributive justice is punishment for the crime. It looks backwards. Somebody did something wrong, and they need to pay the penalty for that. It doesn't look at the way a person might be returned to society, or how the person who did the wrong might make amends with the person who was wronged. That's called restorative justice.

Matthew's Jesus simply says: There are people who blew it on this earth, they didn't show good works. They showed up late for the kingdom party, and they will not be let in.

I have said before that there is a minority report in Scripture declaring that God is redeeming everything and everybody through the cross. Take a look at Colossians 1: "For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."

I believe that in the cross, God restores all things to Godself. Nobody will be permanently thrown out. There is a place for everyone around the banquet table.

Yes, there needs to be judgment; there needs to be accountability. But what if it's restorative judgment, not retributive judgment. What if God says, Even those bridesmaids who didn't have it together, those bridesmaids who were not ready: they will be let into the eternal party as well. They will be included in the community.

Flannery O'Connor has a short story called *Revelation*, in which a racist white woman has a vision of heaven. She assumes she will be one of the first people in line. But in that long line of people marching into heaven, ahead of her she sees black folks and people she would call white trash and all kinds of other people she has a problem with. She's at the back of the line. And in that vision, even her virtues get burned away.

Let's be ready for that day when Christ comes again. I believe that means living every day with the sense that Christ is among us now, in those who struggle, in those on the edges, if we have eyes to see. Amen.