

ARE YOU PREPARED?

This morning we encounter another story unique to Matthew. As when this occurs in others places in Matthew, for example, the Parable of the Weeds in the Wheat, we should take note and be mindful of Matthew's overall themes.

The story is of ten bridesmaids who took their lamps to meet the bridegroom. While it is possible that this story was actually a parable of Jesus some are more convinced that it is an allegorical story that Matthew created. Jesus' parables are grounded in actual life situations that his audience would have encountered and been familiar with. Although we do not know all the details of marriage customs at the time, this story seems a little off with the details of the story. Why would the bridegroom be arriving at midnight? I suppose the bus with the rest of the wedding party could have gotten stuck somewhere, or perhaps it was like the first wedding in which I was ever directly involved as a Pastor. We were all set to start the wedding, everyone was in their places, the organist was ready to shift from gathering music to the selected Prelude pieces and the groom and the father of the bride were nowhere to be found. The wedding start time came and went. 15-20 minutes later they both showed up. They had decided to go have a drink together at a nearby bar just ahead of the wedding. Not sure how that marriage worked out but the bride sure put a brave face on that day. So, first off – having the bridegroom in this parable show up at midnight seems a bit off.

Secondly, who thinks they're going to be buy lamp oil at a shop at midnight? I think you might even be pressed to find that at today's 24/7 Walmart. Lastly, as commentators have pointed out, the point or points Matthew seems to want use the story to make are a bit too clear cut. Jesus' parable are usually a bit more open-ended, inviting the listener to draw their own conclusions. Whatever the case, let's look at some of the details of this story and see if we can't puzzle out together what Matthew wants us to take away from this story.

Let's begin with the bridesmaids. You will note that there is nothing outwardly notable about their appearance that would make it possible to distinguish the wise from the foolish. They appear to be dressed the same, they all have lamps, and they all have oil in their lamps. The only difference between them is that the wise bridesmaids brought along some extra oil, but to the casual observer meeting these 10 on the street they all look the same. The ending of the story, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." echoes the Gospel of Mark and it would be easy to conclude that the point of the story is to stay awake; to be alert. But is that really what is going on in the story?

If we look and listen carefully, we notice that all the bridesmaids fall asleep so keeping awake can't be the point of the story. Wise and foolish together take a nap as they await the bridegroom. The only difference between the wise and foolish bridesmaids is that the wise have brought some extra lamp oil. So, when the bridegroom is delayed and their lamps need to burn longer than expected, they are ready. They are prepared. If preparation is the key to this story, how does Matthew, in his Gospel, invite us to be prepared? What preparations are we asked, invited, commanded to make? What is the "oil" that we are invited to stock up on?

A couple weeks ago we encountered Jesus reply to a question about the greatest commandment and he basically answered, “Love God; love your neighbor.” And, think back to the Sermon on the Mount: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful; blessed are the peacemakers; you are salt for the earth; you are the light of the world. All examples of what living in God’s kingdom, God’s kindom is all about. All about what being “ready,” being “prepared” looks like in a life lived in God’s realm. But as one author has noted:

Many can do this for a short while; but when the kingdom is delayed, the problems arise. Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year when the hostility breaks out again and again, and the bridegroom is delayed. Being merciful for an evening is pleasant; being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires preparedness.

Preparedness and the ongoing life of attentive discipleship.

So, where do we find ourselves in this story? A week ago I might have suggested that we were at midnight and many of our lamps were running low. This morning, I feel as we’ve been granted a reprieve – it’s not yet night and it’s still possible to acquire a bit more lamp oil. So, how are you going to use this opportunity? What preparations have you made/are you making in order to be ready to fully enter into God’s realm, here and now? Yesterday, at our association’s virtual annual meeting, The Rev. Dr. Yvette Flunder, Pastor of The City of Refuge church in the San Francisco Bay area provide the opening sermon. In it she suggested that one way to view the present pandemic was that we have been brought to our Upper Rooms, figuratively, and in some cases literally. We have been called to places where disciples gather in preparation waiting for what God is going to do next. We have gone into quarantine. The question is how we will come out. As Rev. Flunder went on to note, “There is a cost for our call – there is a cost to coming down the stairs from the upper room – a cost, but also a great blessing.

How are you, how are we as a gathered community of faith, preparing ourselves to re-enter our beloved communities: our church community, our local community, our world community? How are we using this time to replenish ourselves, to refill our lamps, so that we are prepared to emerge as light for the world? Sister Joan Chittister has remarked:

As a people, we are at a crossover moment. It is a call to all of us to be our best, our least superficial, our most serious about what it means to be a Christian as well as a citizen. . . .

Where in the midst of such polarization and national disunity is even the hope of *oneing*, of integrating the social with what we say are our spiritual selves? . . .

[We must] make “Love one another as I have loved you” (see John 13:34) the foundation of national respect, the standard of our national discernment, the bedrock of both our personal relationships and a civilized society. . . .

To be *one*, we don’t need one party, one program, one set of policies... What we need is one heart for the world at large, a single-minded commitment to this “more perfect union,”

and one national soul, large enough to listen to one another for the sake of the planet—for the sake of us all.

As Franciscan spiritual author Richard Rohr noted in a devotional earlier this week:

Those who agree to carry and love what God loves—which is both the good and the bad—and to pay the price for its reconciliation within themselves, these are the followers of Jesus Christ. They are the leaven, the salt, the remnant, the mustard seed that God uses to transform the world.

As we gaze to the horizon and looking towards a post-pandemic day how are we feeding, restoring, replenishing ourselves for the night that still lingers and the new day preparing to dawn? How are we preparing ourselves for the significant yet deeply challenging work of reconciliation, of not only knitting ourselves back together, but weaving our beloved communities into openness to receiving God’s already in-breaking realm? As the scouts are noted for saying, “be prepared.” In our daily, often over-looked acts of love, kindness, grace, and forgiveness, may be ready ourselves for what God is going to do next.

AMEN.