

“On Fire”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus loved to use stories about everyday events to describe the kingdom of heaven, and wedding banquets were a particular favorite of his. It makes sense to use a scene of celebration to illustrate the kingdom, a joyous gathering where people are brought together for a singular purpose. But there always seems to be a hitch, a problem with these banquets.

A month ago we pondered a parable about the wedding banquet given for a prince. Of those invited, many gave lame excuses as to why they could not attend. Outraged, the king sent his servants to drag people in from the streets, and among them, there was a man not wearing his wedding garment.

We can sympathize with him. If he was snatched off the street at a moment’s notice, which the parable seems to suggest, how could he have had time to go home and change into something more respectable and appropriate for the occasion? But it seems that everyone else had figured out a way, so the man without a wedding robe was cast out.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids is equally perplexing and disturbing. At first glance, it appears to be a call for vigilance, for us to stay alert for the day of Christ’s coming. “Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” If that’s the message, then it’s frustrating, because we’re fed up with being vigilant. For several months we’ve been wearing masks and washing our hands and staying socially-distanced and keeping up with the news on the coronavirus, and we know that there’s several more months of that ahead of us. But this parable really isn’t about vigilance.

Remember it's about ten bridesmaids: five foolish, five wise. All ten of them went to sleep waiting for the bridegroom to arrive, and when he finally got there, all ten woke up. So vigilance can't be what separates the foolish from the wise. No, what separates them is that five brought refills for their oil lamps and the other five didn't.

When midnight came and the bridegroom arrived, those who didn't bring oil flasks panicked. Their flame was going out for lack of fuel, and they begged for a top up from those who had brought extra, but they refused, arguing there wasn't enough to go around. If they shared, then all ten lamps would stop burning.

The five who had enough oil suggested that the five who were lacking go buy some, a ridiculous suggestion at that hour. But off they went, and somehow managed to get the oil they needed. However, by the time they returned, the party was in full swing with the door shut tight. They begged to get in, but the bridegroom sent them away, claiming not to know who they were.

There are a few things here that really bother me, and maybe they trouble you, too. The Gospels call us to love one another as Christ loves us, and that type of love involves generosity and sacrifice, yet the bridesmaids who had brought oil flasks didn't care to share. That cuts against the grain of so much that Jesus taught that there must be a reason for it, and we'll get there in a minute.

The other thing that upsets me about this parable is how unforgiving and callous the bridegroom is. The five foolish bridesmaids made a mistake. They suffered a lack of foresight. There was no way for them to have known that the bridegroom would be delayed. They assumed that he would show up on time, so they took what they needed and nothing more.

When they realized their mistake, the five foolish bridesmaids took immediate action to get their lamps burning again, but this effort was deemed too little, too late by the bridegroom,

who denied even knowing them. Since this is an allegory where the bridegroom represents Jesus, their exclusion stings. Again, it cuts against the grain of everything else we've learned about our loving, forgiving, accepting Lord.

So what's happening here? Well, a few minutes ago I mentioned that this parable really isn't about vigilance. Being vigilant brings to mind a guard standing watch on a castle wall, scanning the horizon for threats, or for the return of the king. We need to keep vigil for the coming of our Savior, but the parable of the bridesmaids is actually about getting ready, about being prepared for when the crucial moment arrives.

This can be hard to differentiate from vigilance, and you could argue that I'm just playing with semantics. But getting ready and being prepared brings to my mind someone packing for a journey, making sure there's plenty of everything. When I pack for a trip, I bring several extras. I pack an extra pair of socks in case it's rainy and I need to change into dry socks. I pack an extra shirt and pair of trousers in case I spill something on myself or get sweaty and need to change in the middle of the day.

Vigilance is about scanning the horizon. Getting ready and being prepared are about making sure you have what you need when you get to the horizon and go past it to arrive at your destination. It's a subtle difference, but a very important one, especially to understand this parable.

The five wise bridesmaids were over-prepared, ready for anything. They didn't assume that the bridegroom would arrive at the expected hour. They were primed for an all-nighter if necessary, determined that their lamps would not run out of fuel, and we respect and honor that. Yet it's still troubling to us that they wouldn't share. We wonder why not. It comes down to

this. In the parable, what does the oil represent? What is the substance that keeps the flame of a Christian burning bright in the darkness? Deeds of love and mercy.

Jesus calls us to be like him, to be excessive, extravagant with love, forgiveness, mercy, kindness. Jesus calls us to be like him, healers that comfort the suffering, prophets who speak truth to power. Jesus calls us to be like him, obedient and faithful to God the Father, so that light can shine in the darkness and defeat the forces of sin and evil.

If the oil in the parable represents acts of discipleship, then the reason why the five wise bridesmaids didn't share is because they couldn't share. Each person bears responsibility to answer God's call, to experience and exercise faith, and while we can share our faith and help build up each other's faith, while we can support one another in responding to the call of discipleship, responding to that call is ultimately a decision each of us must make. And it's more than a matter of yes or no. It is a matter of more or less, ready or not. It's a question of do you dabble or are you all-in?

That still leaves us with the distressing image of Jesus refusing entry to the five foolish bridesmaids, excluding them from the kingdom, denying that he even knows them. They made a mistake, lacked the necessary abundance to see them through the dark night, but they did everything they could to correct the error, and once they'd repented and gotten what they needed to keep their lamps alight, one wonders why they weren't forgiven and admitted into the kingdom.

The harsh but simple truth is this. There will come a time when it is too late. When the kingdom comes, we will either be on fire with the Spirit or not, which means that waiting is not an option because we haven't a minute to waste. We don't know when the bridegroom will arrive. Obviously, it's taken a lot longer than anyone anticipated for Christ to return in glory. In

fact, Matthew likely included this parable in his Gospel because people were wondering why Jesus hadn't come back yet. But just because it's taken nearly 2,000 years doesn't mean that it won't happen tomorrow or later today.

So it's crucial to practice our faith as best we can, relying on God's grace, determined to be ready when the time comes, with plenty of fuel, plenty of love, to keep our lamps lit. It's crucial that we treat each day as a dress rehearsal for when Christ will come again glory, because each and every day, Jesus invites us to the banquet, to celebrate his presence among us, and to humbly honor the privilege that we've been given to serve the Lord. Amen.