

“Who’s Fooling Who?”

Matthew 25:1-13

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Katie Owen Aumann
on November 9, 2014 at Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church, Durham, NC

Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire, and lighten us with your celestial fire. For if you are with us, then nothing else matters. And if you are not with us, then nothing else matters. We pray in the name of the one you call Beloved, Jesus the Christ, Amen.

The kingdom of heaven *will be* like this... When I read the lectionary texts for this week, I had to chuckle at the irony of preaching a text of anticipation where the primary image is a wedding shortly after my own wedding just a few weeks ago. According to this passage, the Christian life this side of the kingdom of heaven is full of waiting, planning, readying oneself and preparation, and I can attest that there are times where the joy of all of that anticipation is wonderful, but in truth, so close on the heels of my own wedding experience, I read this text with a sort of post-traumatic stress reaction at the idea of remaining constantly in that state of count-down. It’s exhausting and by the time I got to the wedding day itself, my standard line was, “I’m excited for the wedding and I’m most excited not to be planning a wedding anymore!”

On the surface, this parable appears to be entirely about our readiness, whether or not we have taken the proper steps and prepared for the heavenly wedding banquet to come. And there is something natural and appropriate about wanting to be prepared. Not 24 hours after my husband and I got engaged, there was an expectation that our planning and preparation had begun and there was no shortage of voices willing to tell us exactly what that preparation should look like. For the most part, preparation was not about readying our minds and hearts for marriage or prayerful contemplation of what would happen when we were invited into the heavenly banquet, these were voices concerned about whether we were ready for the party itself. Where will it be? What are your colors? Do you have a theme? (To which I often replied, the theme is: wedding). In 2013, the wedding industry in the United States spent \$54.3billion to ensure that brides had every i dotted and t crossed down to the fold of the napkin and the extra flask of oil.¹ And the suggestion of Pinterest, the knot.com and other commercialized wedding resources was that if you do all of the “things” they put on *their* checklist—buy the perfect dress, choose the best centerpiece, buy the perfect party favor—you will be fully ready and prepared when the day arrives. The wise bridesmaids certainly were. They were the ones who pack the emergency kit with bobby pins and hair spray and breath mints and safety pins and Kleenex and extra oil so that they’re ready.

This expectation of preparation extends to other aspects of our life as well. Do you have the right school supplies and the new pens and the backpack with extra pockets ready for the first day of school? Have you planned your route to avoid traffic so that you’re not late on your first day of work at the new job you’ve been anticipating and preparing for? Did you remember your mit for the baseball game that you’ve trained for for months? Did you pre-order the turkey and begin thawing three days before Thanksgiving so that it’s ready to go in the oven on time, just like the Butterball hotline suggests? Have you talked through a birth plan with your doctor and attended lamazze classes in preparation for welcoming your first child to the world? Do you have a plan as your health declines for your funeral and are your financial affairs in order? In every aspect of life, there are elements of preparation that lead us to believe that if we have just “done the right things,” we are ready for the joy that awaits us. And I imagine that most of us—Presbyterians that we are—

¹ <https://www.theweddingreport.com/wmdb/index.cfm?action=db.viewdetail&t=s&lc=00&setloc=y>

fancy ourselves the wise and prepared, the folks who have an almost- Puritan work ethic and pride ourselves on keeping everything decent and in order...and ready. We emphasize our stewardship campaigns so that we can be prepared for the good and faithful ministry God is calling us to next year. We fancy ourselves the ones with the extra flask of oil, and thus perhaps find some comfort in this parable. At least there is a reward for all the work I have done to be prepared!

But any of us who have been a bridesmaid or groomsman or gotten married ourselves know that there is a *plan* for how everything is supposed to happen and the *goal* is to be like the wise bridesmaid. The problem is that there's often a difference between the *plan* and what *actually happens*. Amidst all the advice I received in preparing to get married, everyone always said, "well, there's always something that goes wrong" as if this is a comfort for whatever unknown impending disaster is yet to be witnessed. The groom might get sick, the limo might get lost, the ring bearer might get confused and run the wrong way down the aisle, the best man might forget the rings, the bridesmaid might lock her knees and pass out in the middle of the service, a fight could break out among the in-laws at the rehearsal. Even with every detail marked off a carefully prepared checklist, the best laid plans always leave an element of surprise—because these blessed and holy events are also deeply human and full of our tendency toward the unexpected.

The kingdom of heaven will be like this...

We read this parable believing and knowing full well the right answer to the question, "which kind of bridesmaid do you want to be?" The wise bridesmaid, of course! And we read this parable knowing full well that, try as we might, the part of the foolish bridesmaid feels all too familiar.

And when I admit that I find myself comfortably in the place of the fool, it leads me to ask all kinds of questions: what if the fools couldn't afford the extra oil? And why is it the bridesmaids fault—the bridegroom was the one who was late! If he'd just showed up on time, we wouldn't be in this pickle. Did he not get his invitation? And how did those wise bridesmaids know there wasn't enough oil to go around? Since when was sharing not a good thing? Was it worth it to go through the door to the wedding banquet? What if it was a really lame wedding? Where is a loving and gracious God in all of this—the one who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love? What kind of type-A, OCD, holier-than-thou, obnoxiously-prepared preacher included this parable in the gospel and got to decide who was wise and who was foolish?

And then we realize that preacher is Jesus and we're left saying, "Lord, fool that I am, what must I do to enter the kingdom of heaven?"

While Jesus is concerned in all four gospels about the unfolding kingdom of God, Matthew is especially famous for the parables about who's in and who's out: the wheat and the tares, the sheep and the goats, the wise and foolish bridesmaids. For Matthew, parables often remind us that there is a decision at stake and our readiness for the kingdom of heaven is important. Matthew, writing to a community of Jewish Christians, those who have made a difficult choice to leave the synagogue, is more concerned than the other gospel writers about the choice before us. Because there is something at stake, we are to feel uncomfortable at the idea that we would be one the wrong side of the door. But truthfully, we should feel uncomfortable not just at the idea that the foolish are left pleading, "Lord, lord."...but even if we are bold enough to believe that we are the wise, we should have a healthy discomfort with this text, because who wants to go to the ultimate heavenly banquet without your fellow bridesmaids and friends?

Thankfully, the powerful blessing of Jesus' parables is that the obvious meaning—the one resting on the surface—is often not the point. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor at a creative and quirky

church of misfits in Colorado, writes, “This morning, my breakfast cereal box did not contain a parable decoder ring. I did not get one. No one did—not me, not my kids, not you and not the crowds who listened 2,000 years ago. That’s because there is no better way to suck the life out of a parable than to explain it, to decode it, to finalize the meaning of it. That’s not how parables are. They aren’t to be studied and interpreted so much as to be experienced. We don’t figure them out; they figure us out.”²

So perhaps we should enter into the story again.

A crowd sits waiting for the bridegroom. They’ve gathered together, lamps in tow, dressed in their finest, ready for the dowry to be settled and to go out and meet the bridegroom on the road so that the week-long party can begin. Something has clearly happened because the groom is late. A quiet murmur begins to spread among the crowd as people begin to gossip about what possibly could’ve happened. The appetizers have gotten cold and everyone is getting tired. The wise and foolish alike succumb to exhaustion and fall asleep. The one left on watch duty cries out, “he’s coming!” and everyone wakes up, fixes their matted hair, straightens their clothes and scurries around ready to greet the bridegroom. Everyone grabs for their lamps, trims them, lights them, and then a fight breaks out, not just any fight—a “just-work-up-from-my-nap” caddy girl fight. One bridesmaid sees another refilling her lamp and says, “share some of your oil with me!” The other looks at her lamp, realizes she still cannot see the bridegroom way off in the distance and anticipating a long walk says, “No, I won’t have enough, go get more for yourself.”

A Cheshire grin of trickery crosses the wise bridesmaids face when she realizes she has given this poor girl a nearly impossible task at this hour of the night and she has just won herself a place in the front of the line in her made-up competition to meet the bridegroom first. At this point, things fall apart. The flustered set of bridesmaids run off in a panic to deal with the situation, putting forth a good college effort toward success in this impossible scene. While they’re gone, the bridegroom arrives, the doors open and shut again in an instant and the opportunity to join the party is over like that.

Having arrived at the wedding banquet, the wise bridesmaids first reaction was surely, “Ah, I did it! I did everything right!” seeking to take credit for successful entry. But standing on the other side of the door, hearing their friends call out, “Lord, lord, let me in!” dismay also overcomes them. “Do we really want to be at a party without our friends?” they think. Perhaps we messed up. After all, the esteemed preacher of the Beatitudes, who declared, “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” is the host of this party. Jesus, the one who declared, “if anyone wants to...take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile” (Matt 5:40-41), is the one who opened the door. Regardless of what side of the door the bridesmaids are standing on, the question seems to be, “why am I standing here?” Who’s really the fool?

There is an old story told about a man with three sons. He told his sons that he was aging and needed to decide which son would be responsible for his inheritance, so he gave them a test. He said go to the market with \$10 and purchase something that is large enough to fill this room. Whichever of you is able to fill the room the most is worthy enough to inherit my land. They each went to the market to make their purchase. The first son came home and rolled out a piece of cloth as far as he could on the floor. Though it covered much of the room, it did not fill the room. The second son carried in a bunch of hay and though it covered more of the floor and stacked higher

² Bolz-Weber, Nadia. “Don’t Dissect Parables.” <http://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2012-06/dont-dissect-parable>

than the first, it did not fill the room. The third son walked in with his hands empty and looked at his father. He asked for a slight delay, until nightfall. His father was frustrated at his youngest son but agreed. They returned to the room when it was dark and the third son pulled out of his pocket a candle and a match. He lit the candle and the room was full, every corner, with light. The father smiled and said to the youngest, “You are truly the wisest of my sons. You will inherit what I have to offer.”

The third son knew what the bridesmaids didn’t seem to understand. Oil may be a commodity, but light is not. Light defies the laws of limited resources and zero-sum games. Light—from the Sun is the sky to the Son who walks as the bridegroom to meet us—is in God’s control, not ours. And light can and should be shared. The bridesmaids assumed that their preparation was based on having enough oil, but they failed to see that their readiness for the bridegroom, their entrance into the kingdom of heaven came not from their own preparations *alone*, but from their ability to stand in the shadow of the light that shines in the darkness, a light that can be shared with all.

The parable suggests that *preparation* is the only distinction between the wise and foolish bridesmaids. Aside from the amount of the coveted commodity, oil, their circumstances are the same. They arrive on time. They wait. They all get drowsy and fall asleep. Awakened, they all trim their lamps. Whether or not they brought extra oil seems to be the only difference.³ But the parable’s end really hinges not only on the “foolish” bridesmaids perceived lack of resources when the time comes but also on the “wise” bridesmaids awareness of the power of light and their willingness to share. Entrance into the kingdom of heaven when the bridegroom arrived hinged on their ability to walk in the light—together—on this side of that pivotal moment.

The kingdom of heaven *will be* like this....Jesus says as he tells this parable. But as he declares so often in Matthew’s gospel, “Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand...” His final call to “Keep awake” is perhaps *not only* a call for the future, for our preparation and readiness for that which is to come, but also a call for us, in the moment, here and now. How will we venture out into the darkness bearing the light of Christ with us in the world? “His call, “Keep awake” does not mention oil or the wisdom or folly of those who bring extra or those who fail to.”⁴ His final words indict them all—for they all, wise and foolish alike, fell asleep. His final call, “Keep awake,” invites us to consider how the lamp of Christ casts light on the bridesmaid next to us and how we will share that light by loving our neighbor and using our gifts, in how we multiply our talents, and clothe the sick and feed the hungry. And so Jesus’ parable ask whether we are ready...not just for the future but today...to walk in the light in the light of Christ...a light that enables us to see the needs of the bridesmaid next to us...a light that fills the room, and the night, and the darkness...a light that ultimately bursts through the closed door of the grave...a light that is not ours to control...a light that can and must be shared. Keep awake.

In the name of the light who shines in the darkness, Jesus the Christ, Amen.

³ Carey, Greg. “Commentary on Matthew 25:1-13.”

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2207

⁴ Lockhart, Rev. Peter. Personal Ministry Blog. <http://revplockhart.blogspot.com.au/2014/11/its-not-about-oil.html>