Parables That Preach: The Ten Bridesmaids

Matthew 25:1-13

August 7, 2022

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The summer I graduated from college, I was a small group leader at Montreat’s youth conference. I signed up for a full two-week gig and by week 2, would fall into my bed at Assembly Inn, exhausted and would fall immediately asleep.

But one night was different.  One night, I was jolted out of my sleep by my alarm clock. I jumped out of bed and looked around and realized that it was still completely dark out. Pitch black. I’d set my alarm for 7 a.m. and 7 a.m. in the summer in Montreat is typically a bright and sunny time of day. But here I was, standing in my room, in total darkness.

Now, what had really happened was…somehow, my brain had played the sound of my alarm inside my head.  Have you ever done that? My brain does it a lot — I’ll swear my alarm is going off and jump up only to find out I have 23 more minutes to sleep. This is what happened that night at Montreat. My brain was playing tricks on me. I could go back to sleep and wake up hours later when my *actual* alarm went off and would be well-rested and ready.

But instead of taking a moment to think through a *logical* reason why I’d think my alarm was going off while it was still dark out, my first thought was — oh my goodness, the sun has gone out.

I stood there in the dark and legit thought the sun had died and this was the end. At no point did I think back to the episode of the Magic School Bus when Ms. Frizzle teaches the kids about how if the sun ever went out, the world would pretty immediately be freezing cold and yet it was still a pretty comfortable 70 degrees. At no point did I look at my roommate, sleeping peacefully in her twin bed on the other side of the room and wonder why she didn’t seem to be affected by this catastrophic turn of events. At no point did logic ever enter my brain.

Instead, I began thinking through all the things I needed to do.  Could I get back to Durham before the world ended? Did I have enough gas in my car? If I got there, would my family just sit in our house in the freezing dark until….? Until what? How long did we have? What was going to happen? What would it be like?

Eventually (though it took way longer than I care to admit), logic finally took hold and I thought to look at my phone.  Sure enough, it was 3 in the morning, and it was all just a weird trick of the brain. Once I’d had a laugh at myself and managed to slow down my heart rate a little, I’d be able to fall back asleep and wake up to another sunny day.

I think about that night every now and then and chuckle to myself still. But those questions that I asked in that moment - they were very real concerns to me.

They were the kinds of questions that the disciples and those hearing Jesus’s teachings on the Kingdom of God had for Jesus. So many of the parables that we’re studying this summer deal are in response to someone asking Jesus — what will the Kingdom of God be like?

But today’s parable is a little different. Instead of focusing on what will happen when Jesus returns, *this* parable tells us what we should *do* until then.

Today’s parable is about that thing most of us are not great with — waiting. It’s about ten bridesmaids who are waiting for a bridegroom to arrive so that the wedding party can get started. Five bridesmaids are prepared — they bring extra oil for their lamps. And the other five are described as the foolish ones.  They don’t think ahead and when the time comes and the bridegroom arrives, they panic and realize their error.

Now, I’ll admit that I struggle with some of Christ’s parables that describe people being left out of the Kingdom. I’ve shared before that I struggle with the sheep and the goats parable because…sometimes I can be pretty goatlike.  Perhaps you also struggled when you heard me read the ending of this parable that says that when the five foolish bridesmaids returned, the bridegroom tells them, “Truly, I tell you. I do not know you.” Perhaps the idea that Jesus might not recognize us because of our sinful ways is a pretty uncomfortable thought. It is with me.

But thankfully, we can remember that parables have multiple layers. Like an onion or a parfait or any other layered simile, we can examine a parable from multiple angles and ask questions to help us understand a parable’s multiple messages. Instead of holding the parable at a distance and assigning the role of bridegroom to Jesus and the ten bridesmaids to humanity, we can ask: what lessons can we glean from Jesus’ story? And then we can turn the parable to find ourselves within it and ask — where do we fit into this parable? Instead of assuming that the parables are always answers, what if we decided that parables are also about learning to find the questions?

One question we might ask to better understand this parable is: What was wise about the first five bridesmaids? What was foolish about the others? Was it that they weren’t prepared? Or was it something else?

In an essay on the Ten Bridesmaids, theologian Debie Thomas asks these questions. She acknowledges that the five wise bridesmaids were prepared to wait for the long haul, that they “take seriously the possibility of surprise, of delay, of hardship, of unpredictability.” Thomas encourages us to ask ourselves — “Are we ready for the long haul? Do we have the flexibility to handle the unexpected? Or are we clinging to rigid, narrow notions of what God’s presence looks like, such that we miss God when God actually shows up?”

I like Thomas’s questions as we find ourselves over two years into pandemic life. This pandemic has been a test of Thomas’s questions. Does Covenant have the flexibility to handle the unexpected? Absolutely. Look at how quickly we adapted to online worship, fellowship, education, and governance. We’ve proven that we are in this following God thing for the long haul. The question for us now will be — are we ready for whatever unexpected thing comes next?

While we are still very much in this pandemic, this parable also stresses the importance of presence. “You are more than your oil supply,” Thomas writes. “So, stick around.” She continues: “As far as I can tell, the fatal mistake the five ‘foolish’ bridesmaids make is that they leave.  They assume that their oil supply is more important to the groom than their presence at his party.”

Thomas describes what the wedding party looks like without the five bridesmaids who left, writing that she believes the wedding procession suffers as a result: “Five fewer lights brighten the groom’s path.  Five fewer voices cry out with joy at his arrival.  Five fewer friends dance and sing the night away in honor of the groom and his beloved bride.  The loss is communal, extensive, and real. This is not a situation to celebrate or endorse; it’s a situation to grieve.”

Are you worried about your own oil supply? Are you running low? Now is not the time to leave to find more oil elsewhere. Now is the time to stick around.  In today’s world in which we feel that we need to present our best selves at all times, this parable tells us that it’s okay to be low on supplies — on energy, on preparedness, on reserves.  It’s not *what*we bring to the party — whether that party is worship on Sunday morning, or when we begin Sunday school next month, or yet another committee meeting — it’s not *what* we bring to those events…it’s that we are *there*.

That’s the other question that I have when I read this parable.  Why didn’t the wise bridesmaids understand that it was most important to have everyone there? Why didn’t they share their oil? Why were they operating out of a place of scarcity? Why didn’t they say to the other five bridesmaids - “Our lights might not last as long, but it’s better to have you at the party and us celebrate in the dark than to have our lamps lit”? Why didn’t they trust that the bridegroom would provide what they all needed? It’s his party after all, isn’t it?

These parables are so tempting to confine to just one interpretation with each component neatly corresponding to different people. It’s tempting to say to ourselves — well obviously I’m in the wise group of bridesmaids.  After all, I’m here, right? I’m logged on, right?

But I agree with Debie Thomas when she asks: “What would it be like to care more about the emptiness in our neighbor’s flask than the brimming fullness of our own?”

This parable calls us to look up from our own bright, burning lamps, and to peer out into the darkness and ask — “who is missing?”

Part of our job as your pastors is to look around at the sanctuary each week and at those who are checking in on our Facebook feed to see who is here and who is *not*. John and I regularly check in with each other and say, “Have you spoken with so and so? I haven’t seen them in a while.” We try to stay on top of that list, but there are so many of you! A good problem to have, but we need your help as well. We need you to also look around.

We need you to join in asking the big questions: Who are we missing?  Who might need to borrow some oil? How can I share mine?

May we trust that Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world, will illumine us all.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

Debie Thomas’s essay:

[https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2806-the-story-of-the-bridesmaids](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2806-the-story-of-the-bridesmaids&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1659972571357321&usg=AOvVaw3JWwRZuY6OybB6-EuUml6f)