

Sermon - Proper 27, Year A
The Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids
11/12/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In Jesus' time, it was traditional for a wedding ceremony to last several days. The wedding itself would often take place at the home of the bride, and when the ceremony had concluded, the couple and the exuberant wedding party would proceed to the family home of the groom. Without electric lights or cars, the procession would unfold on foot, typically in the dark by this point in the celebration. It was considered a great honor for the unmarried women of the bride's family to serve as bridesmaids, and their one job was to light the way.

It is this wedding imagery we find Jesus engaging today as he instructs his disciples from the Mount of Olives. We are nearing the end of the Gospel here – in the very next chapter, Judas will depart from Christ's table to betray to him. Jesus has left Jerusalem and pointed toward the bright temple and the splendid buildings and declared, "truly I tell you, not one stone will be left upon another that will not be thrown down." The disciples, like all of us, are eager to hear more about this. When will it happen? What will it look like? What will be the signs of Jesus' coming and of the end of the age?

Jesus responds with several parables, including this one that has become known as the parable of the "wise and foolish bridesmaids." Ten women await the bridegroom with their lamps: five who bring an extra supply of oil and five who do not. All of them fall asleep, but when they awaken to proceed to the feast, the five without oil are left to run to the dealer to refresh their supply. They rush to the banquet only to be shut out from the party for which they have waited.

It can seem harsh to us to encounter this parable and the questions it raises about precisely what is going on. Here is Jesus, this teacher and Son of God, who has just preached for twenty-five chapters about loving your neighbor, and he seems to be praising the bridesmaids who refuse to share. He has taught about forgiving sinners and yet here is the bridegroom – always the metaphor for Christ himself in the parables – apparently shutting out the ones who need to be forgiven. How could this wedding feast be anything like the kingdom of heaven?

We must trust the Holy Spirit to take us a little bit deeper into the parable, and we will find that it is in fact a parable of great beauty and great promise. In it, we find the most gracious invitation from God. This is not a parable about being a good boy scout or girl scout – being prepared with the proper equipment for the candlelight hike. The lamps, here, are images for the heart. In the fourth century, St. Augustine preached on this parable, declaring that while each of the women had hearts for good works, not all of them had the oil of *caritas* - charity. Love. And one cannot truly share love from one person to another like an amount of oil. Over a thousand years later, Martin Luther preached on this very same parable, and he declared that the oil in the lamps was faith. One needs faith to illuminate the darkness, and our faith, while its light can brighten the path of another, must be received and nourished by each of us in our own hearts. It's not that the wise bridesmaids didn't want to share because they were selfish, but rather that the substance of their lamps – the good oil – is a treasure of another kind.

The key to the parable is in the words of the bridegroom. The late-coming bridesmaids cry out, "Lord, Lord, open to us!" and the bridegroom replies, "truly I tell you, I do not know you." He does not say, "you are not permitted because you did not have oil." He does not say, "you aren't permitted because you are late." He doesn't say, "you are not welcome because the

road to this banquet was shrouded in darkness and my new wife has stubbed her toe.” He says, *I do not know you.*

This is the ultimate tragedy of the parable. Remember that even the wise bridesmaids fell asleep. No one is perfect here. But the ones who enter the feast are the ones whom the bridegroom *knows*. The oil and the lamps aren’t arbitrary tasks or hoops that one must jump through in order to be good family members. **The lamps and the oil help us see the bridegroom. Love and charity help us know who Jesus is.**

This is the promise and the joy of this parable: Jesus is telling us, “I want you to know me.” This is the first and the most important thing. We might hear this story and think, “Oh no, how much oil do I have? Am I late? What if the door is slammed in my face?” But the point here is that you have been invited to this banquet. You are meant to be there. You are welcome. The Lord of hosts, the God of heaven and earth, the one who has known you since the beginning of time, he is speaking to us: “I want you to know me.”

Let your lamp be filled with the oil of love and the oil of faith, but know that the preciousness of both come only from the way they show us the face of the One who calls us. This parable is not a threat. It is a promise. It is a promise that the bridegroom has invited *you*, and that what you will find in his household is joy beyond measure. And when you have lit your little path, day by day, midnight by midnight, toward that final breath before the fullness of heaven, you will sing the closing verse of your soul’s pilgrim song:

*I know that my Redeemer liveth,
and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth;
and though this body be destroyed, yet shall I see God;
whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold,
and not as a stranger.*