

“O Lord, our helper, let us seek you.
Let us rejoice and be glad in you.” AMEN!

His name was Wilmer Romberger.

Not “Wilbur” he told me.

“Just about everyone
gets it wrong at first,” he said.

Wilmer was a man on the visitation list
when I began internship.

When I met him in the hospital
he told me that he would never be able
to come to a worship service
at church again because,

after the hospital, he was going
to assisted living to be cared for
in his last months of life.

He said, “Vicar Tom, I’ll need you
to bring the church to me,
if you can find the time.”

And in that moment there
was a decision to be made.

It couldn't be ignored and it was
the beginning of something, a choice
was made to bring a light
to Wilmer each week.

No matter what low-income assisted
living center he was assigned to,
Wilmer asked for the light to be brought.

There was really a string of decisions to be made.

Yes - Go or
No - Don't Go
on each Tuesday.

On the next visit, when I brought communion,
he told me that he had
the "new" Lord's Prayer memorized.

That's the one we say here.

The one that uses "forgive us our sins"
instead of the word "trespass."

When he told me that, I knew Wilmer

was not only receiving a light from me
but he was also giving his light to me.

And since that day, I made sure
that, I too, memorized that
“new” Lord’s Prayer,
so we could recite it together
before having communion.

During another visit, he told me
that he was teaching it to his roommate.

A light was being shared.

Wilmer’s been long dead, but still his light
comes to me when I can close my eyes
to recite that prayer. (Pause)

Jesus said, “Keep awake therefore,
for you know neither the day
nor the hour.”

Like the scene of low income nursing homes,
the parable of the 10 bridesmaids
which precedes Jesus’ words,
about keeping awake,
doesn’t bring much comfort.

How can we be ready when we've
already had to wait so long?

We just aren't sure how long to wait!

There are some things we are sure about, though.

We are sure that the parable has to do
with what we now call
Jesus' Second Coming.

It has to do with a separation between
those who are included and those
who are excluded.

We are sure that the parable disrupts us
and scares the heck out of people!

Which is why we try to sugar coat the message.

But fear and fallacy are not true
to the purpose of Jesus' parable nor
the context of the message.

And the context is that this parable comes
in a section of Matthew where there is
language about judgment.

Justice language that will be served
by a God who can do nothing else.

Like what we recite in our creed,
“He will come to judge the living
and the dead.”

The Lamb of God, Jesus, will come to judge
and this parable gave a responsibility
to the disciples who heard it.

The context is that Jesus spoke directly to
his disciples and he speaks directly to us,
his followers.

There’s a choice to be made.
A decision to make.

There will be consequences to those
who are found to not be ready. (Pause)

Our first job is to let the parable disrupt us.

To sit in the uneasy space of it and
let us ask what we don’t know.

Why is the bridegroom late?
Why aren’t some prepared?

Why does the parable use
oil and lamps as illustrations?

Why don't the 5 wise ones share their oil?

Why do the 5 foolish ones leave
to buy oil at midnight?

Immediately we discover that we come away
with many more questions than sureties.

It's the beauty of the parable,
Jesus' best teaching tool.

It allows us to get serious with our faith.

We can feel uneasy about it and ask questions
and then, yes, even make a choice.

That choice is that we want
to be sure we are ready.

We want to be sure we are among the wise.

And here's the thing!

Being wise is not a once and done.

I'm a pastor, you're in church, or
watching from home.

Something has gripped you (and me)
strong enough to be here and
to be a part of St. Stephen.

Dare I say, you are wise! :-)

Yet, according to Jesus
that is not the end of it.

We know it's true too that we will
need to make other choices and decisions.

Ones that reflect that we know this Jesus
and seek to obey Him.

We must not assume our wisdom is once and done.

The 5 "wise" ones do something "foolish,"
at least in the eyes of Jesus.

They look to the others in the bridal party,
who are in crisis, with haughtiness,
with superiority.

They acted with arrogance and said,
“No way! Go out and
get your own oil!”

It was not good advice considering it's midnight!

We see it's easy to not notice this because
we want to be the ones
who are always prepared.

And the cruelty of the competent
rears its ugly head.

We can't blame the foolish for responding
the way they did for they were in crisis mode.

The powerful question we should be
asking ourselves at this point is:

What happened when the bridegroom came
and those who were ready
went in to the banquet and
the door was shut?

It's very hard for me to assume that
there was much celebration because
half of the wedding party was absent,
half were sent out at midnight to get oil.

What did those “wise” ones feel?

I’ll wager to say they felt accountable.

We can learn from their fictional decision and
we can find appreciation for
this difficult parable because Jesus

invites us to work in ways that
we might behave so as to bring about
a different ending than the one
in the parable. (Pause)

Thankfully, what doesn’t need
to change is that we need sleep.

In this way all bridesmaids were caught unprepared.

There’s still going to be a time of panic.

That’s what happens when we are
caught unprepared.

When this happens some people will say,
“You deserve the consequences.”

Some people won’t want to share because

they're scared that they won't
be left with enough.

We can have compassion for these
because it is understandable that they
wanted the feast to be successful.

But it is at this point that the parable can
teach us its true meaning.

What if some of the unprepared, "foolish,"
ones said,

"You know we could run out and try to find oil,
but the most important thing for us to do
is stay here to greet the bridegroom,
whether with oil or not.

We'll just have to say
we are sorry if our lamps go out, and
rely on his good graces."

If that was said then a prepared, or "wise,"
one might have said,

"My heart burned when you spoke
about saying sorry and relying on grace,
maybe I have put too much stock in

my own self concern and
not enough in joy.” (Pause)

So, the ending could have been,
they all go off and greet the bridegroom,
in various states of preparedness,

and all of them are a bit more humbled.

It is not a bad model for a typical Christian worship.

Since the bridegroom is Jesus,
what would he do? (Pause)

And this is where the parable leads us.

It's not hard to imagine that he'd say
you're all kinda foolish and
you're all pretty guilty, but
you remained united.

You didn't throw the other out.

You didn't hurt one another over your greed.

Come with me into the banquet hall
and let me show you the way
“I am the light of the world.”

This ending to the parable is
meant to be considered.

That's a decision we are called to make;
a choice we have to decide.

What happens when our lights done show?

Look at our world to get the answer.

Greed will extinguish the light but all
it might take is one, or a few of us to say,

“Stay here, use our light to spark your light.

We will ignite each other and
the light of the world will shine through us.”

I think Paul would agree...

“Encourage one another with these words.”

Amos would say, “God doesn't want
the noisy gongs nor detached rituals,
but a liturgy that connects to justice
that leads to a way of life.”

What will we choose?

AMEN!