

## PROPER 27, PENTECOST 23, YEAR A, NOVEMBER 8, 2020

The parable about the ten bridesmaids, five who were wise and five who were foolish, has never sat right with me. Did you ever ask yourselves these questions: Where even is the bride in this story? Why doesn't the groom show up for his own wedding until midnight? Why does the bride — whoever she is — put up with such a ridiculous delay? Why are the “wise” bridesmaids stingy and mean? And why, after keeping his poor bridesmaids waiting for hours, does the groom blame *them* for lateness — and shut the door in their faces? As I said, I never liked this parable, because it seems pretty awful and doesn't at all appear to embrace God's grace and universal welcome

The story tells us about 10 bridesmaids who are waiting to meet the bridegroom. It is my understanding that part of the Jewish tradition of the time that the bridegroom would come to the house of the bride's family where the party would continue. The task of the bridesmaids was to welcome the bridegroom when he arrived.

So all 10 turn up, they have lamps which we can safely assume are filled with oil and burning and they begin their vigil waiting for the bridegroom to come. So the bridesmaids wait... and they wait... and they wait... and they collectively doze off. All 10 fall asleep!

Suddenly there is a fuss and the figure of the bridegroom approaches. Now the time has come! But the oil has run low and an issue arises. Five of the bridesmaids had brought extra oil while five had not — they were out and they needed more. So the five whose oil had run out turn to their sisters, their friends, their family and they say please share, give us oil for our lamps, keep them burning.

But the wise ones say no, there is not enough to go around. No, we have ours and we are going to the party. Now I have to say at this point traditionally, this parable has been interpreted to mean that we should be like one of these wise ones and have extra oil for our lamps, extra faith maybe, extra preparedness — whatever that means.

The bridegroom is also interpreted to be Jesus but that doesn't hold water either because it's contrary to everything Jesus has said and done. At the heart of Jesus messages lies a generous God who invites us to generosity even at great cost to ourselves. Earlier in Matthew Jesus teaches, “If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” He also said, knock and the door will be open not slammed in your face.

At the heart of Jesus messages lies a generous God who invites us to generosity even at great cost to ourselves. So looking at this parable from a different perspective than being prepared for Christ's second coming, I don't want to be associated with the wise bridesmaids in any way shape or form. The example and behavior of the so-called wise ones to me is abhorrent. They are operating on the basis of scarcity and fear, they refuse to share their oil. There is almost an air of smug self-satisfaction as they go off to the party. We got in because we are wise. Do they not care about those left behind? Those outside? Those who are excluded? Their sisters? Their friends? At this moment they appear to be more like the Pharisees that Jesus is often criticizing.

They are so conceited about their own preparedness and “wisdom,” they forget all about mercy, empathy, kinship, and hospitality. They forget that the point of a wedding celebration is *celebration*. Gathering. Communing. Joining. Sharing. It doesn't occur

to them that their stinginess has consequences. That it sends their five companions stumbling into the midnight darkness. That it diminishes the wedding, depriving the bridal couple and their remaining guests of five lively, caring companions.

And what about those foolish bridesmaids. Don't we all know in life something always goes wrong. That's the way life is. So in a way I think this parable reminds us to expect the unexpected. We have to learn to adjust to what life throws at us. So the foolish bridesmaids act. They did not sit idly by and give up, they race off to the market in the middle of the night and somehow find someone to provide them with more oil only to come back and have the door slammed in their faces

If this parable is supposed to be about the kingdom of God it sounds more like an anti kingdom parable. This whole thing doesn't read like a grand depiction of heaven or the hoped-for kingdom rather it smacks of judgement and individualism.

I'm not sure what it will take for us Christians to live fully into the abundance of God. But it's clear that our assumptions about scarcity are killing us. We're so afraid of emptiness, we worship excess. We're so worried about opening our doors too wide, we shut them tight. We're so obsessed with our own rightness before God, we forget that "rightness" divorced from love is always wrong. We live in dread that there won't be enough to spare. Enough grace. Enough freedom. Enough forgiveness. Enough mercy. Somehow, we would rather shove people into the dark than give up the illusion of our own brightness.

What would it be like to stop? What would it be like to care more about the emptiness in our neighbor's oil lamp than the brimming fullness of our own? Remember at the end of Matthew Jesus tells us how we know what inheriting the kingdom actually looks like; it's by feeding the hungry, satiating the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner. Because we find those people are Jesus among us.

So I think this parable is really about us and the way we filter ourselves into the haves and have-nots and then determine who is right with God. We do this even as Jesus tells us to love unconditionally and give with great generosity and hope with reckless abandon! The point is the work God calls us to is to shine the light of Christ's love and generosity in the midst of darkness. That's the work. Not arguing over oil or shutting out the ones we call fools. Just remember we have been both wise and foolish but God's love remains constant and that's what really matters. Amen