

## PROPER 27, PENTECOST 23, YEAR A, NOVEMBER 12, 2023

The parable about the ten bridesmaids, five who were wise and five who were foolish is one of those stories that makes you shake your head and say what in the world is this supposed to mean. It's also one of those stories that gets used to strike fear and intolerance in people as it wants to emphasize what's going to happen if you're not ready for when Christ comes again. This is not a parable about predictions or assumptions of God's kingdom of who is in or who is out. So, what are we to make of it? I think one of the best modern reinterpretations of this parable that puts it into perspective was done by Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran Pastor.

She wrote, "It feels like Jesus is saying the Kingdom of God is like a bad dream where I'm supposed to go pick someone important up from the airport like . . . Dolly Parton, but I forget to fill my gas tank and then I'm idling outside baggage claim for so long I doze off and then when Dolly Parton finally texts she's almost there, my car starts beeping that it's nearly out of gas *but* then I realize the dude in front of me has a gas can strapped in the back of his monster truck and I ask if he can help me out but he just points to the overpriced gas station outside the airport and in a panic I use the fumes in my tank to get there but then when I'm filling up my Subaru I see Dolly Parton drive off in the passenger side of the dude's F150 and she doesn't even return my wave like she doesn't even know me."

Is that what the kingdom of God is like? What exactly are we to take from this parable? That we shouldn't rely on others? That we shouldn't give to those who ask of us? Isn't that like Jesus suddenly taking back everything he said about generosity and self-giving and instead gave us a parable about how we should be stingy and self-reliant?

I mean, if you are thinking that this parable doesn't sound like most of the other stuff Jesus said, you're not alone. Sometimes we fall into the trap that parables are little moral stories about how we are to behave or else. But parables are really about truth which is sometimes hidden and disruptive because we cling to rigid, narrow notions of what we believe God's kingdom is all about in the here and now. So, what truths are hidden in this parable?

First of all, I don't think the foolish bridesmaids were foolish because they didn't bring extra oil or because they fell asleep. I think they were foolish for listening to the other bridesmaids tell them what to do. I think they were foolish in the same way we are foolish

because they listened to voices other than God's trying to tell them who they were. They listened to those whispering voices telling them that they weren't good enough or had enough. They were foolish because someone shamed them into thinking they were lacking some magical ingredient. How many times have we believed the voices that said, you're unlovable or your body isn't beautiful or that your only value is in your excellence or what you have done, good or bad, is actually who you are? What about the voices that say God is only interested in our strength, our preparedness, and goodness. The foolish bridesmaids were so consumed by the shame of not being enough they busied themselves into trying to fix it instead of trusting that the light they did have was enough. The same is true for us.

The truth for the foolish bridesmaids and us is don't allow your fear or maybe your sense of inadequacy keep you from being who you truly are. Be willing to show up as

you are in all your complicated, disheveled, questioning, wondering self. You're the one that is important not what others say about you. You don't have to dazzle or have everything together. Don't assume you have to be more than who you are and try to fix what you think is wrong. Remember, God is light. And Jesus is the light of the world. We have to realize in God's eyes we are enough and we are.

Now what's the truth about the so called wise bridesmaids. They are operating on the basis of scarcity and fear and that's why 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. Don't they care about those left behind? Those outside? Those who are excluded? Their sisters? Their friends?

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. The wise bridesmaids fear there isn't enough for everyone, so they hoard what they have. They can't comprehend that they have the abundance of God's love that they are to share.

Here again what will it take for us to live fully into the abundance of God. 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" isn't what God desires from us rather it is love. 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 care more about the emptiness in our neighbor's lamp than worrying that ours that are brimming over isn't enough?

We know that the readers Matthew wrote too in the first century were in conflict with local religious leaders who considered their Christian peers heretical and deviant. It is likely that there was much discussion around who belonged and who didn't, who was "in" with God, and who wasn't.

Sound familiar? One of the great tragedies of the Christian story across history is that we are better known for policing our borders than for welcoming our neighbors. We are quick to say, "I don't know you," to those who believe or practice differently than we do. We feel safer and more pious behind closed doors than we do with open arms. Maybe this parable is showing us the ugliness of the closed door.

At the heart of Jesus messages lies a generous God who invites us to generosity beyond ourselves. It's about being awake to the world around us, the people around us and the needs that confront us on a daily basis. This parable is telling us that the way we filter ourselves into the haves and have-nots and then determine who is right with God is not what God call us to do. Rather, Jesus tells us to love unconditionally, give with great generosity and hope with reckless abandon! Remember it's always about love.

We all know hate is easy. Love is a challenge. Jesus tells us to love that looks upon each person with a desire for their wellbeing, love that looks upon human

community with a desire for healing and peace with justice, love that looks into all creation with a desire for mending and reverence, love that is compassionate and merciful, love that is stubborn and sacrificial. 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 shutting out the ones who don't think like us, look like us, talk like us, believe like us.

This morning as we baptize Evan Richard, we are reminded how in our baptismal covenant we firmly state that we promise to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. That means we are called to see Christ in those we meet. We are called to be Christ for them. We are called to reach out to all those in need. This is how God loves the world. This is how God loves you. This is the love God created us to choose and to live. We are called to "Choose this day whom we will serve." May we choose a God who is unimaginably bigger than we can imagine. A God whose every story begins and ends in love that embraces who we are and always remains constant. Amen