

## “Lamp Oil and Purell”

A sermon based on Matthew 25:1-13

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Eight months ago now, the pandemic was on the horizon, ominous and foreboding but yet unknown, and none of us really knew what to do, but suddenly it seemed imperative to many of us to stock up on certain things. Cans of beans. Bleach wipes. Hand sanitizer. Toilet paper. Some of those things we were not totally right about – some of my friends have humorously confessed that they seldom eat beans in their normal day-to-day life, and they don’t quite know what they were thinking buying a case of canned beans as if the pandemic would change that. The toilet paper thing, though – we were all right. Maybe some of us were not as generous as we should have been, but an article I read as the toilet paper shortage became clear spoke about the reality that in pre-pandemic times, a significant amount of Americans’ restroom usage happened in office buildings, stores, and schools – places that stock industrial toilet paper not designed for home use – and there simply were not enough rolls of toilet paper of the standard size for residential use being produced for a population where everyone was in their homes all the time. We figured it out and made do; companies found creative solutions, and the worst is over for the time being (although it’s still pretty tricky to find any bleach wipes), but there was a real question for a while of how to manage when that necessary resource was scarce.

Which brings me to the foolish bridesmaids in today’s parable. Jesus’s parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids is puzzling and enigmatic: ten bridesmaids take lamps and go out to await the arrival of the groom. Now, the wedding customs of first-century Israel were quite different from our wedding customs. When an engaged couple was to be married, the groom would come at night to the bride’s parents’ home to collect his bride. The bride’s attendants — the bridesmaids — would meet the groom on the road, and escort him to the bride’s home to collect the bride, and they would all process through the town, back to the groom’s home, where there would be festivities and feasting.

The ten bridesmaids go to wait for the bridegroom, taking with them oil lamps to light the way for the wedding party. Five of the bridesmaids — the wise ones — bring with them extra supplies, flasks of oil to refill their lamps. The other five — the foolish ones — fail to bring extra oil. The evening stretches into night, and the bridesmaids sleep. Suddenly, at midnight, there is a shout: the bridegroom is imminent. The bridesmaids wake up, trim the wicks of their lamps, and prepare to go out to meet the groom, but the five without oil have already used up their supplies before sleeping. “Give us some of your oil,” they ask of the bridesmaids who have reserves. “No,” their prepared counterparts respond, there won’t be enough for you and for us. Go and buy some more.” So the foolish bridesmaids run off to purchase more oil. By the time they’ve

replenished their lamps, the wedding party is long gone, and feasting at table. The tardy bridesmaids start to knock on the door, crying out to the groom. But he responds that he does not know them, and the bridesmaids are shut out. “Keep awake, therefore,” Jesus concludes, “For you know neither the day nor the hour.”

The traditional interpretation of this parable centers around the parousia — the moment when Jesus Christ will return victorious in splendor to usher in God’s reign. Traditionally, interpreters would have understood this parable to mean something like this: Jesus is the bridegroom, who is coming but we don’t know when. Faithful Christians are the wise bridesmaids, waiting, watching, prepared for the return of Christ. The foolish bridesmaids are Christians who have fallen away, gotten distracted, aren’t paying sufficient attention to their faith lives: they had been waiting and watching, but then at the decisive moment, they’re going to be caught unprepared. And the wedding banquet is heaven, the reign of God, with the faithful, wise ones inside and the slackers locked out — in eternal darkness — forever.

You might have gathered that I am skeptical about the traditional interpretation.

Thankfully, there are many, many ways to interpret a parable. Parables are not secret coded messages that we can simply decode, read, understand, and be done with. A parable’s purpose is to draw us deep into the questions and mysteries of faith. They’re like kaleidoscopes: you hold them up to the light, and look at them, and look for the breathtaking beauty of God, and marvel. And then, you turn them over, shift the pieces around, look again, and see something entirely different.

So if you, like me, are skeptical about the traditional interpretation, then there is good news for us: we can turn this parable over and look again.

Now, we remember that Jesus sent his apostles out telling them to bring no supplies, no provisions, nothing but the clothes on their back and the shoes on their feet and the message of salvation on their lips, and to travel through the world, spreading the good news and trusting God to provide. So can we really believe that the bridesmaids are condemned for not packing emergency supplies? Of course, there’s something to be said for this message of caution: we are called to be alert and attentive and prepared. We are called, if we’re able, to carry with us a deep reservoir of faith, hope, and love, so that we might be always prepared to shine God’s light in the world. But the truth is that we sometimes find ourselves depleted — whether it’s days when we’re low on supplies, low on patience, low on hope, low on time, or low on faith. When we are running on empty, we can remember that our redemption lies not in our preparation, but in God’s grace.

While the foolish bridesmaids may have been underprepared, they are not the only ones whose behavior falls short of God’s ideals. Let’s look, for instance, at the bridegroom: late to his own wedding, he leaves the attendants waiting until midnight. And then, when the five who had run out of oil appear at his door in the wee hours of the morning, he is curt and thoughtless as he sends them away. Although the traditional interpretation says that the bridegroom is Christ, Jesus

never tells us that. So, I wonder, who is this bridegroom who locks his new bride's dearest ones out of the wedding feast? We believe in a God who counts every hair on our head, and clothes the lilies in glory, and calls us each by name; is Christ really telling us that he will stand at the locked door of heaven, turning away the latecomers? I doubt it. But perhaps there is something of that bridegroom in our own hearts: the part that is judgmental and punitive and unforgiving, the part that hypocritically holds others to a high standard that we ourselves cannot meet. Could it be that the bridegroom is us?

Or perhaps, is there a part of us that is the wise bridesmaids: prepared and equipped and alert and ready, but smug and superior, failing to be generous and gracious to our sisters and brothers who are scattered and flustered, caught flat-footed and underprepared?

Come to think of it, is there a part of us that is like those foolish bridesmaids? And perhaps, when that happens, the error is not in being unprepared, but in a lack of humility, a lack of flexibility. Does the wedding party really need ten bridesmaids' lanterns? Light is not a personal possession; it can be shared. The light of five lanterns could be enough, I would think. The five could say, "We're sorry, our lamps have gone out," and then join anyway in the wedding procession and the feasting. But they don't. They don't want to appear foolish, and so they run off to get more oil and they miss the whole thing. Perhaps there's a word there for us, when we feel like we have to do everything ourselves, have to have it all together, have to be prepared and polished and organized. There's a message of grace, an invitation to lean on each other, to trust each other to carry the light — the light of faith, the light of hope, the light of love.

Jesus started the parable by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like this." But it's hard to see what about this parable is so very like the kingdom of heaven — the foolish, unprepared bridesmaids, the self-righteous, stingy bridesmaids, the punitive, exacting groom — none of them seem so heavenly to me. So let's turn the kaleidoscope again.

This is a parable full of people behaving pretty poorly altogether: the ones who fall asleep when their job is to stay awake, the ones who are running on empty when their job is to carry the light, the one who is late when his job is to be on time.

The kingdom of heaven is like this: there is a wedding feast, a great, abundant table for laughter and joy and community. And God invites to that feast every single one of those foolish, selfish, silly, tardy, judgmental, underprepared people. God calls them into community with each other, and God sees them with all of their bickering and judging and falling short, and God loves them.

The kingdom of God is like this: a table of blessings, set for the foolish and the wise, the early and the late, in the wise and foolish hope that one day we will all feast together, and even if we are low on oil or purell or canned beans, even if we are low on hope or low on faith or low on patience, our cups will overflow. Thanks be to God. Amen.