

*I Can't Do It for You*  
**A Sermon on Matthew 25:1-13**  
**Proper 27**  
**November 12, 2017**

## **Introduction**

Our story today is known by many names: The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, The Parable of the Ten Virgins, The Wise and Foolish Virgins. The Ten Maidens. The Greek word παρθένος is usually translated as bridesmaids or virgins, but it literally means teenager—a man or a woman. From the context it means a woman who is of marriageable age but who isn't married. The emphasis is as much on their youth as on their virginity. I would translate it as teenage girls or maidens to emphasize their youth.

So today we will talk about the Parable of the Ten Teenage Girls. Kaitlyn, this could be about you and your friends.

## **First Move: Parables About the Kingdom**

The text begins, “The kingdom of the heavens will be like ten teenage girls.” The kingdom of the heavens is Matthew's way of saying the kingdom of God. When we are thinking of images for the kingdom of God, ten teenage girls is not the first thing that pops into our minds.

That is typical of how Jesus describes the kingdom. He uses parables and aphorisms. These are stories and sayings with unexpected twists. He tells these stories about what the kingdom of God is like instead of laying out propositions: the kingdom of God is these five things. Jesus challenges us to think about the kingdom of God in a new way. He gives us unusual images that are hard to wrap our minds around. How can the kingdom of God be like that? How can the kingdom of God possibly be compared to ten teenage girls? He intends for us to keep thinking of this strange image and puzzle over it.

We need to know a little about wedding customs in ancient Israel to better understand the parable. Weddings were arranged by the parents of the bride and groom. The couple would be engaged for several weeks or months. On the wedding day, the groom went to the house of the bride's father and negotiated the dowry with him. The bride is treated as the property of the man—one man, her father, agrees to sell her to another man, her husband. The dowry is the sale price. After they agree on the

dowry, the groom takes the bride back to his father's house. Jews in the first century were not only patriarchal, they were patrilocal. A groom and his bride would live in the same house as the groom's father, or near the groom's father. The bride would spend the rest of her life living with the groom's family.

The ten teenage girls apparently are at the house of the bride's father, waiting for the groom to come. The lamps are probably torches—they are poles with a container at the top that holds rags that can be lit. The rags will only burn for a little while unless they are dipped and re-dipped in olive oil. They accompany the bride and the groom and light the way as they go to the house of the groom's father.

The groom is delayed and doesn't come to the bride's house until the middle of the night. All of the teenage girls have fallen asleep. A shout rings out, "Behold, the groom. Go out to meet him."

All the girls wake up and fix their torches. Five of the girls brought no olive oil for their torches. Their torches will go out right away and they won't be able to light the path to the groom's house. Five of the girls brought containers of olive oil to pour on the rags in their torches.

The five foolish girls ask the five wise girls to give them some of their olive oil because their torches already are going out. The five wise girls refuse. "There is not enough for all of us. Go into town to buy some more." The commentators note that this is a rough spot in the parable. The marketplace in town would not be open in the middle of the night.

When the five foolish girls get back to the bride's house with olive oil, the groom had already come and led everyone there to the groom's house. The wedding feast had begun and the door was shut.

When the five foolish girls arrive at the groom's house, they cry out, "Lord, lord, open the door for us." But he answered, "Truly I tell you, I have not known you." This is an echo of the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

## **Second Move: A Spiritual Lens**

Most commentators believe that this parable comes from Matthew and Matthew's community rather than from the historical Jesus. Matthew intends the parable to be read allegorically. Jesus rarely if ever uses allegory in his parables. Allegory means that something or someone in the story symbolizes something or someone else. The groom is Jesus and the bride is the church. The wedding feast is

the kingdom of God. The ten girls are disciples. The traditional reading is that not every person who calls themselves a disciple will get into the kingdom of God.

The key to an allegorical reading of the parable is the olive oil. What does it represent? Good deeds is the most common response in the tradition. Acts of kindness and mercy. The five foolish girls are disciples who have not done good deeds while they were awaiting the return of Jesus. They will not be admitted to the kingdom. The purpose of the parable is to encourage disciples to be ready, keep doing good deeds, until the kingdom comes.

Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest and a leader of the centering prayer movement, offers an alternate reading. She suggests in *The Wisdom Jesus* that we have been viewing Jesus through a Western lens, which is actually a Roman lens. The two distinguishing marks of this lens are that it confuses unity with uniformity and that it puts a high priority on order and authority. An emphasis on morality, doing good deeds, is a way of keeping people in line.

Bourgeault says that diverse streams of Christianity came out of the Jesus event in Galilee, and the Roman stream has dominated the Western church. Jesus was seen in the Roman stream as a savior—he died for our sins. That became the foundation of Western theology. Western orthodoxy also regards Jesus as a high priest and a prophet, but Jesus was not a priest. He had nothing to do with the temple hierarchy. Nor was he a prophet, at least in the usual sense of the term. He was not interested in the political fate of Israel and he rejected the title of Messiah.

Bourgeault encourages us to open ourselves up to the perspective of Eastern Christianity, which sees Jesus primarily as a wisdom teacher. Parables are a genre of wisdom literature. Jesus is a life-giver rather than a savior. He was concerned with transforming human consciousness.

Evangelicals tend to see the kingdom of God as an afterlife in heaven. Liberal theologians describe the kingdom as a social utopia, a place where God is in charge of the politics. Jim Marion, a Catholic mystic, offers a spiritual perspective of the kingdom of God—it is a metaphor for a state of consciousness. It is not a place you go but a place you come from. You experience the kingdom of God when you put on the mind of Christ. You discover your True Self.

It is a nondual or unitive consciousness. A dualistic mind focuses on the differences between people and things—it labels them. It sees the world as a series of opposites: good/bad, wise/foolish, light/darkness, order/chaos, white/black, friend/foe, Greek/barbarian. A dualistic mind turns away from mystery and uncertainty. It seeks to control its environment and reduce things to something familiar. Systems of power tend to be dualistic. They are focused on control and

survival. They use violence to maintain control. True spirituality is the search for union not control. It focuses on commonality instead of difference. Unitive consciousness sees no separation between God and humans and between humans and other humans. Jesus talks about no separation between God and humans when he describes the mutual indwelling. God in me. I in God. God in you. You in God. We in each other. No separation between humans and other humans is described in Jesus' teaching to love your neighbor as yourself. We usually interpret that as, Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. A unitive consciousness understands loving your neighbor as yourself as a continuation of your own being. It sees that your neighbor is you.

Bourgeault understands the parable of the ten teenage girls as wisdom teaching about inner transformation. The oil stands for a transformed consciousness. The five wise girls have put on the mind of Christ. They have deepened their own consciousness by absorbing Jesus' teaching and devoting themselves to spiritual practices. The five wise girls can't give any oil to the five foolish girls because they can't transform their consciousness for them. You have to do it yourself. Someone else can't do the inner work for you.

The language of the text supports this reading. The parable says that five of the girls were wise. Wise is a translation of the Greek word, φρόνιμος. The usual Greek word for wise is σοφός and the Greek word for wisdom is σοφία. Φρόνιμος also carries the connotations of judgment and discernment. The noun form, φρόνημα, means the ability to fix one's mind on something. It is a way of thinking or a mindset. The five wise girls have been able to fix their minds on Christ. They have changed their way of thinking.

The Western view of this parable sees the kingdom of God as a time of judgment and the return of Christ as a time in the future when Christ will physically return to earth. Chapter 25 is sometimes called the judgment discourse. Liberal theology struggles with the notion of a day of judgment—it is difficult to reconcile weeping and gnashing of teeth with a God of mercy and forgiveness. The bodily return of Christ is a supernatural event that is difficult to reconcile with what we know from science.

The Eastern or spiritual reading of this parable does not need to understand the kingdom of God as a day of judgment. We experience the kingdom of God when we put on the mind of Christ and deepen our hearts into a unitive consciousness.

### **Third Move: Experiencing the Kingdom**

We often overlook that this is a parable about joy. There is a party going on. The point of the story is that we miss out on the party if we don't fill our torches with oil.

When I preached on this text six years ago, my sermon title was, *Who Wants to Party with a Christian?* Nobody. Christians have a reputation for being stuffy and self-righteous. Southern Baptists say that it is a sin to dance because it leads to sexual sin. The temperance movement led Protestant churches to replace wine with grape juice for communion. It is a practice that most churches still follow today. We have lost some of the symbolism. Wine is viewed as a blessing from God in the Old Testament, a foretaste of the Messianic banquet. Grape juice doesn't make for much of a party.

John Dear reminds us that one of the commands in the Beatitudes is, "Rejoice and be glad." We live in an angry, fearful culture. Joy for too many people comes from medicating themselves. Joy for others come from winning a ball game or an election. This is fleeting joy. Momentary joy is all we can know if we build our houses on sand. We are shutting ourselves out of the party.

Joy comes easily to the mystics. The purified soul has purged itself of thoughts and desires and can see God clearly, as in a mirror. The mystics are filled with joy when they practice centering prayer. Teresa of Avila speaks of her beatific vision of union with God. It is not an image of God but a feeling of being overwhelmed and enveloped by God's love. The great light of love fills her soul.

Joy in the kingdom of God comes from inner peace. We know we are loved. We can feel God's love coursing through us. We can feel God's love running through all things.

People who put on the mind of Christ are joyful people. The Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Richard Rohr, John Dear are exuberant. They laugh and smile. The joy comes bubbling out of them.

I can't say that I know any teenage girls who have unitive consciousness, but I know several that laugh and smile a lot. Maybe that is on me—I assume they are not deep and don't get to know them.

I asked Kaitlyn to help me prepare my sermon by telling me how the kingdom of God is like teenage girls. She thought about it a few minutes, then said that when teenage girls are together, they totally lose track of time. That is a good start.

Richard Rohr in *The Naked Now* talks about three ways to view the sunset. Rohr uses three men in his example. I am going to use teenage girls. Three teenage girls stand by the ocean, looking at the same sunset.

One girl saw the physical beauty and enjoyed that. This girl was like 80% of the world; she deals with what she can see, feel, touch and move. That is enough reality for her. She has little interest in larger ideas or the grand scheme of things. She sees with her senses, which is good.

A second girl saw the sunset. She enjoyed all the beauty that the first girl did. She also enjoyed the power to make sense of the universe and explain what she discovered. She thought about the rotation of planets and stars. She uses imagination and reason, which is good.

The third girl saw the sunset, knowing and enjoying all that the first and second girls did. She was able to progress from sensing to explaining to experiencing. She remained in awe before an underlying mystery that connected her with everything else. She could enjoy the sunset without feeling a need to describe it.

## **Conclusion**

How is the kingdom of God like ten teenage girls? We don't normally think of teenage girls as having the deepest level of consciousness. Perhaps that is the point. Women were viewed as the property of the man in the ancient near East. They weren't typically thought of as moral and spiritual examples. Especially young women.

Jesus used a deacon as the example of a servant leader. Deacons were table servants, which was menial work done by women and slaves. Mary Magdalene was his closest disciple. In all four gospels she was with him at the cross when the male disciples abandoned him. In all four gospels she discovered the empty tomb and became the first witness to the Resurrection. The leading role for Mary was too much for the later church tradition to bear. She was recast as a repentant prostitute who anointed Jesus' feet with oil. The tradition retreated into dualistic thinking.

Mary was a model disciple. Perhaps teenage girls can be, too. Perhaps they can see the sunset in three different ways.