

***Missing Out on the Party***  
**A Sermon on Matthew 25:1-13**  
**Proper 27**  
**November 8, 2020**

**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 actually means teenager—a male or a female. From the context it means a young woman who is of marriageable age but who isn't married. The emphasis is as much on her youth as on her virginity. I would translate it as teenage girls to emphasize their youth.

It is part of Matthew's Judgment Discourse. What is distinctive about the Gospel of Matthew is that it has five major sermons woven into the narrative. This is the last of the five sermons. It takes up three chapters—it is as long and as important as the Sermon on the Mount, the first major sermon. The first chapter is a series of woes against the scribes and Pharisee, hypocrites; this corresponds to the series of blessings that begin the Sermon on the Mount. The second chapter is a reworking of Mark's Little Apocalypse. The third chapter, which we begin today, is three concluding parables about the kingdom of God.

**First Move: The Parable of the Ten Teenage Girls**

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 bride would be betrothed for several weeks or months. To be betrothed is to be more than engaged; it is to enter into a marriage contract. The only marriage contracts we have today are prenuptial agreements; it's not the same thing. We don't have contracts that obligate the bride to marry the groom. 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 convey 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 groom's brothers and their families also would live with or near the father. The groom's sisters would go off to live at the homes of their husbands. So the women would spend the rest of their lives living with their husbands' families.

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 are outdoor torches that are intended to be used to light the road as the wedding party makes its way from the home of the bride's father to the home 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. The five foolish girls brought no olive oil for their torches. Their torches will go out right away and they won't be able to light the road to the groom's house. The five wise 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 ordinarily would not be open in the middle of the night, though it is possible that the whole town may be up on the occasion of a wedding party.

It's hard to have much sympathy for the foolish girls. Their role in the wedding festivities is to carry torches to light the way from the bride's house to the groom's house. They can't do it because they forgot to bring any oil to light their torches with.

Imagine if the best man or the maid of honor forgot to bring the wedding rings to the ceremony.

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

When the five foolish girls arrive at the groom's house, they cry out, "Lord, Lord, open the door for us." The groom answers, "Amen, I say to you, I have not known you." These are the only words spoken by the groom in the parable. It sounds harsh. It would shock the sensibilities of a Middle Eastern village where the entire community joins in the wedding celebration. Locked doors and wedding parties don't go together.

It is an echo of the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdoms of the heavens, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." This is not the way a bridegroom speaks. It is Jesus speaking as the Son of Man.

The parable closes with the command to be prepared or to stay awake. It is alright to sleep; you don't have to live in constant anxiety about the Parousia. It is enough to be doing the acts of mercy toward your neighbors that are the marks of righteousness. The present is a time of preparation. Then you will be ready when the decisive hour comes.

## **Second Move: Two Readings**

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. The historical 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 acts of mercy, until the kingdom comes.

It is also a parable about judgment. There are five wise teenage girls and five foolish teenage girls. The wise girls are obviously the ones we should identify with. They have their torches ready. They have been doing acts of mercy while waiting for Christ to return. The ancient church saw them as examples of bride mysticism, female Christian ascetics who loved Jesus. These female ascetics later in the tradition would become nuns in convents who had a deep mystical relationship with Jesus. The women represent the church as the bride of Christ. Their goal is intense fellowship beyond this world when he returns at the Parousia.

The foolish girls are disciples in name only. They call on Jesus as “Lord, Lord,” but they have done nothing to help build the kingdom. The parable emphasizes the separation that will take place at the Parousia. The foolish girls are not ready when the decisive moment arrives.

A minority of commentators believe that the parable comes from the historical Jesus. The point of the story is joy at the coming of the kingdom. The kingdom is compared to a wedding party, which would be a huge celebration in rural villages in Galilee. It is a highly emotional event, and it is appropriate that Jesus chooses such an event as a metaphor for the kingdom. There is more to the kingdom than doing good deeds. Guilt is part of our Roman Catholic heritage. Too often we think of discipleship as being all about duty and responsibility. There is not enough joy in our lives.

The historical Jesus would not necessarily have intended it to be a parable about judgment. The background could be the Jewish wisdom tradition, which often contrasts the wise and the foolish. Matthew does it himself in the Sermon on the Mount when he compares the wise man who builds his house on solid rock with the foolish man who builds his house on sand.

It is not necessarily harsh that the door is shut on the foolish girls and that they are denied entrance to the party. It could be the shattering of the illusion of endless opportunity. We presume that we have all the time in the world to rebuild broken relationships, to learn a new skill, to deepen our connection with God, to participate in restorative justice. We shut ourselves out of the party by putting these things off.

We don't have to choose. We can read the parable as both-and. As an allegory about judgment, the parable is directed to the church. It is about insiders not outsiders. Don't presume that you will be admitted to the kingdom just because you say, “Lord, Lord.” You need to be prepared, doing the acts of mercy that are marks of the kingdom. If you get distracted and focus on other things, you will miss out.

It is also a parable about joy. It is a warning that you will miss the party unless you prepare for it. When the bridegroom comes, you want to have your torches filled with oil so that you can light the way to the party at the groom's house.

### **Third Move: Be Fully Alive**

The command at the close of the parable is usually translated as stay awake or be prepared. The Greek verb is γρηγορέω; it can also be translated as be fully awake watch, notice. The root word is ἐγείρω, which in the Easter story is translated as to be raised. Jesus is raised from the dead. I would translate Jesus' command as, "Be fully alive."

I had Covid pneumonia last month. I was in the hospital for eight days. For most of that time I was hooked up to oxygen and was receiving two to six liters per hour. I was able to sit up all day on the couch in my hospital room, but the only time I would get off the couch was to go to the bathroom. I would get short of breath and have to do deep breathing exercises just to go to the bathroom.

I got a glimpse of my own mortality. Looking at the data, I could see that I had a 5% chance of dying. There aren't many times in your life when you are at a 5% risk of dying. That is actually pretty close to Russian Roulette, which is a 16% chance: one bullet in six chambers is 16%.

I am recovered now. When I was discharged from the hospital, the doctor told me to take it easy, don't overdo it. I have been taken his advice seriously.

For the last month I haven't done any work. A month off work is a really long time for me; I can't remember when I have taken a month off in my adult lifetime. Two weeks of it was being sick; then two weeks of convalescence. I returned to work full time this week; before then I hadn't gone to the law office, and I had only been to the church a couple of hours. I decided that I needed to enjoy life more. I have spent most of my time reading for pleasure and listening to music. I treated myself to a good set of headphones.

For the last 25 years I have been too obsessed with doing good deeds. My ex-wife and I divorced in 1997 when my daughter Mary Kate was four years old. I wanted my daughter to know that I put her first. Our visitation schedule was that my daughter stayed overnight with me every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday night. I did not change that schedule to suit my social calendar. Mary Kate was my date every Saturday night for ten years. I took her to church every Sunday morning for ten years.

I started seminary in 2001, when Mary Kate was in second grade. It was like working two jobs: I was a full-time lawyer and a full-time student. When I graduated seminary in 2009, I was already serving as your minister. I was working three to four

days a week as a lawyer and three to four days a week as a minister. I was working eight days a week.

I didn't have a social life for ten years. There was no time for it: I was working as a lawyer, studying as a seminary student and being a single parent.

I actually didn't mind. I was working too hard, but I was enjoying life. I have always found law work challenging. My studies and then my ministry were fulfilling me spiritually. I loved my daughter more than anyone else in the world and was spending a lot of time with her.

My life was about duty and responsibility. Being a good father, being a good lawyer. Studying hard. Being as productive as I could with my time.

I must admit now that life was a chore. There wasn't much joy in my life. Joy is to be excited about being alive. The kingdom of God is a party.

The first fun thing I did was buy season tickets for the Hornet games in 2005 when the New Orleans team relocated to Oklahoma City. I got good seats, near half court. Chris Paul was a rookie then. I still have a Chris Paul Hornets jersey hanging in my closet. I went to every Hornets game for two years, 42 games a year, and took Mary Kate to about 30 of those games each year. Mary Kate loved going to the games. She even worked as part of the Thunder sales staff for two years while she was in college.

What brings me joy is creativity. Creativity is part of the core nature of God. I am inspired by people who go beyond the ordinary and tap into the creativity of God that lies deep within them. Basketball players are creative. Chris Paul is often described as the point God.

In the past six months I have spent a lot of my free time reading classic novels and listening to music. My personal favorites are novels by Jack London and William Faulkner and albums by Bruce Springsteen and David Byrne.

Jack London is a cracking good storyteller. His two most popular books, *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, are each written from the perspective of a wolf. They were international best-sellers when they were published in the 19-oughts. London can imagine what life in a wolf pack is like and describe rivalries between wolves as if they were humans. Another novel, *The Sea-Wolf*, describes a sea captain who is appallingly primal. The sea captain is the personification of a wolf.

I read three novels from Faulkner's classic period, 1930-1935: *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary* and *Light in August*. Faulkner's characters are mostly poor whites from rural Mississippi. He knows them intimately and he does not glamorize them. Some of them are just plain mean and stupid. Others are doggedly persistent. Faulkner is

a Southerner, but he is honest about Southern culture. He holds a light to the suffering that his characters received from Puritanical judgments by the townspeople.

Springsteen has been my favorite performer since I first saw him when I was a college freshman at Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa in 1975. I have seen him six times. Springsteen is as close as rock and roll gets to God. Talk about a storyteller. His concerts are like gospel revivals. Springsteen is 71 and has released two albums in the last two years. He is still at the height of his creative powers.

David Byrne was the lead singer and songwriter for the Talking Heads. He has collaborated last year with Spike Lee to create a Broadway show based on his new album, *American Utopia*. HBO taped one of his shows and started plying it last month. Byrne is a nerdy intellectual. He has a sense of fashion and a stiff way of dancing that reminds me of David Bowie. He is 68 and he still brings a sense of joy to his music. His new album has simple, uplifting songs like *Every Day Is a Miracle*, and socially-aware Black Lives Matter protest songs like *Hell You Talmbut* where he and his band remember and honor more than a dozen African-Americans who have been killed by the police. The refrain is simple: “say his name” or “say her name.”

Creativity lifts us beyond ourselves and into the realm of the transcendent. We share in the divine life. This is what it must be like to be totally free and spontaneous, to respond in unexpected ways.

Observing great creativity in others elevates our own creativity. It helps lift us out of the tedium of day-to-day existence and behold what a life filled with the sacred looks like. Where does your creativity lie: cooking, gardening, painting, crafts, carpentry, writing, preaching, singing, dancing, playing piano?

Creativity fills us with joy. Life is no longer just one damned thing after another. It is full of surprises. It is full of newness. It is part of how we reflect the image of God.

## **Conclusion**

Come to think of it, ten teenage girls is a pretty good metaphor for the kingdom of God. It’s hard to think of anyone more spontaneous and unpredictable than a teenage girl.

The kingdom is about being fully alive. Life is short. We can’t sleep walk through it. There is a party going on. Don’t miss out on it.

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