

**November 12, 2023**  
**“Wisdom’s Light”**  
**Wisdom 6:12-20 / Matthew 25:1-13**  
**Pastor Tim**

Amy and Gabe will tell you that I pretty consistently lose track of my wallet, my cell phone and the cell phone charger.

In the case of my cell phone charger, they’ll also tell you that even when I know where it is, even when I have it ready to go, I’m not real good about actually using it.

I resent having to do it all the time. I hate feeling like I’m a slave to my cell phone, instrument of capitalist control that it is. In more ways than I care to know. I’m annoyed that I have not one, but two, more things to keep track of. I miss the landline.

But I digress. The point with all of that is that I’m often dealing with a low battery, and so – more than I care to admit – dealing with a dead battery. No phone.

Fortunately for me Gabe now has a phone, and he and I now have the same phone – which means we also have the same charger. And unlike the “wise” bridesmaids who, in our gospel reading this morning, refused to share their lamp oil with the “foolish” bridesmaids, Gabe lets me use his charger in a pinch.

Thanks be to Gabe.

To understand this parable of the ten bridesmaids, we have to understand the context.

Culturally speaking, the waiting, the preparation, is for the wedding banquet. We call it the wedding reception.

The newly married couple is set to return to the groom’s family’s house – and it is the bridesmaids’ role to welcome them into the household as a married couple. To show them hospitality, and then to participate, of course, in the wedding banquet to follow.

In this story, because they don't know exactly when the couple will return, the bridesmaids have to be prepared to welcome them in the dark. Hence the need for lamps, and oil to light them.

Theologically speaking, the story points to the expectation of Jesus' return. During the season of Advent, now just a few weeks away, we both celebrate the so-called "first" Advent of Jesus' miraculous birth and anticipate the so-called "second" Advent, the "second coming" of Jesus' triumphant return.

A return of which we know, as our reading says, "neither the day nor the hour."

The arrival of the end of the age, when the kingdom of God will at last be known on earth as it is in heaven. When the wolves will lie down with the lambs, in Isaiah's glorious vision. When "justice and peace will kiss."

And here we note that in the ancient world, a wedding banquet, a wedding celebration, was often used as a metaphor for the end of the age – the celebration of a new world.

From the perspective of Matthew's author, writing some 85 years or so after Jesus' life on earth, and the still fledgling Christian community, they didn't expect to wait that long.

Which in my understanding reflects a theological misunderstanding – that Jesus, in fact, returns again and again and again, all the time, in the form of the so-called "least of these."

As in Jesus' words, which shortly follow our reading this morning, whenever "you did it (or did not do it) to one of the least of these siblings of mine, you did (or did not do it) to me." Again and again and again.

In any case, to understand this story is to understand both the cultural and theological contexts.

Jesus begins this parable as he does most parables: "The kingdom of heaven will be like this." So pay attention. We have, at this point, near the end of Jesus' ministry on earth, plenty of parables revealing what the kingdom will be like. What is required to enter the kingdom.

Ten bridesmaids, with their lamps, are ready to meet the bride and bridegroom. The newly married couple.

Only it turns out half of them weren't ready enough. The five "foolish" bridesmaids don't think to take extra oil with them. Maybe they just forget, too caught up in the excitement? Maybe they just assume they won't have to wait, or wait long?

Maybe they're just ready to party?!

As it happens, they do have to wait. They get tired of waiting, ALL of them – the "wise" and the "foolish" alike. So while the parable concludes with exhortation to "keep awake," it doesn't mean, of course, to literally not sleep. That would be foolish. We need our sleep.

They all sleep, but again, only the wise are fully prepared when the time finally comes. At midnight. In the middle of the night, when the lamps are necessary to help the couple see their way home. See their way to the celebration where their joy is shared by the whole community.

In a panic, the five bridesmaids realize their lamps are burning out at exactly the wrong moment. Eager to fulfill their roles like all the rest, they beg the other bridesmaids to share.

But they refuse, out of fear that they will all run out. And so sent off to buy more oil, the "foolish" bridesmaids end up missing the couple's arrival. They miss the opportunity to show them hospitality.

And they end up, sadly, missing the party.

The door, dramatically, is shut. They beg the bridegroom to let them in, but he refuses. It's apparently too late.

"Truly I tell you, I do not know you."

Now whether or not you read the bridegroom as a stand-in for Jesus himself, let's go ahead and be honest that his response is incredibly harsh and altogether unnecessary. If I were one of those bridesmaids, at the very least, I'd be trying to reach the bride to let her know that she just made a huge mistake. He's not the good guy he appeared to be.

And for that matter, why doesn't the bride come to their defense? They're friends, after all. Surely she would notice they weren't at the party and insist on finding them?

And while we're reading into the story, what about the response of the five "wise" bridesmaids? They really couldn't share even a little oil from their flasks? I mean, they knew the couple was arriving. They knew they were close. How much oil did they really need at that point?

On the surface this parable reads like a nightmare. I don't know about you, but my recurring nightmare – my anxiety dreams – involve some variation of me somehow missing out on my entire senior year of high school. Showing up the last day in a panic, only just then realizing that that I've missed out on the entire year. No books, no nothing; fully unprepared for final exams.

Too late to graduate. Left out of the celebration. Left out of the party. It's a little triggering just reading this parable.

But, of course, it's a parable. It's a teaching story. We're not meant to take it literally. We're meant to scratch our heads and open our hearts to consider what in God's name it means.

We're meant to seek the Wisdom it contains, trusting that – as our other reading from the Book of Wisdom suggests – that we will find her; she being the female expression of God. Trusting that she "hastens to make herself known to those who desire her."

On the surface that wisdom seems clear enough, especially from the perspective of Matthew's author – anticipating, any day now, Jesus' world-changing return. That wisdom speaks to a sense of urgency, not putting off till tomorrow what you can do today. Carpe diem.

“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” Keep awake. Stay alert. Be prepared.

But even that reads like a threat. Keep awake, or else. Stand guard, watch your back, cause the bridegroom, Jesus, will sneak up on you like a thief in the night.

That's about fear. Using fear, like so many of our elected leaders, like so many of our Christian churches, to motivate faithfulness.

Where's the wisdom in that? Where is wisdom's light, “radiant and unfading,” to be found in that? That is not the Jesus I know.

Maybe this is simply a parable about intention. The fundamental pearl of divine wisdom that to join in the wedding banquet, to share in its love, its joy, its celebration, we have to join in its preparation. We're all invited. We are ALL invited to the party!

To seek the kingdom is to find it, as to seek Wisdom is to find her. The kingdom is nearer than we think, Jesus reminds us again and again; far off as it may so often feel. It resides, in fact, within each of us.

So intention is critical. You can't find what you don't seek.

And to seek the kingdom is to live by its wisdom, making sure that we have enough oil for our lamps to keep our own lights burning.

To let our own lights shine so that others' lights may shine. To live lives of radical hospitality to help make way for the Jesus made known in the “least of these” so that they, too, can join the party. Because we are ALL invited.

In that way, think of having enough oil as a metaphor for loving yourself. Caring for yourself. Being graceful with yourself.

We cannot love our neighbors unless we also love ourselves. Our lights cannot shine on behalf of and in relationship with our neighbors if we run out of oil in our own lamps. If we lose track of our chargers. If our batteries die.

The wedding banquet is a celebration gathered around love, and so in a sense, we do miss out – don't we? – if and when we run out of oil in our lamps. When we fail to love ourselves, and so also fail to love our neighbors in kind.

That is Wisdom's light. Wisdom is whatever leads us to love with great intention, to love more fully and consistently. Wisdom is whatever readies us for love so we can share in celebrating the love feast.

But I believe Wisdom's light further reveals to us, as Jesus does, that the kingdom will never FULLY come without our light. And without everyone's light. And so love requires grace, because we are all of us a mix of wise and foolish. Saint and sinner.

Which is why I can't resist taking that wisdom and reworking the parable. Imagine a different ending. After all, Jesus is crystal clear that the so-called "sinners" are beyond welcome at his banquet. No less the foolish.

As Steve Garnaas-Holmes suggests, "The parable isn't just a fable, 'a story with a moral.' It's an experience in many dimensions with multiple layers, that can open our eyes or raise questions in many ways. Maybe it's not trying to 'tell' us anything, but inviting us to experience something that gives us a new perspective."

So imagine the bridegroom keeping the door to the wedding banquet wide open, welcoming the "foolish" bridesmaids to the celebration. Showing them hospitality, grace, love, even after they failed to show it to him.

Or if he doesn't, imagine the bride or any of the other guests asking about the other bridesmaids when they don't show up. Imagine them leaving the party to find them, to bring them in from the dark to make sure that they're part of the celebration.

Or let's go ever further. Imagine the "wise" bridesmaids sharing their oil, extending hospitality, grace, love to their friends. Knowing that we all run out of oil sometimes, for one reason or another.

That is Wisdom's light. Radiant and unfading, that our lights – when we love her, when we rise early to seek her, when we are vigilant on her account – might also be radiant and unfading.

Friends, the wedding banquet is set before us. And with our invitation comes the ongoing invitation to love with great intention. To ready ourselves, always, in every moment, for love.

The reading from the Book of Wisdom concludes with verse 20: "... so the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom." And that kingdom, that KIN-DOM, is none other than the kingdom of God. The kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of love.

Seek and you will find.

May it be so.