



“READY OR NOT...”

Matthew 25:1-12



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Inspired by a sermon by Rev. Dr. Samuel Massey, PCUSA

I don't really like this parable. It makes me wonder if Jesus ever recovered from that little incident with his mom at the wedding at Cana. "Jesus, honey? They're out of wine...."

In today's story, 5 out of 10 bridesmaids mess up. On the scale of wedding fiascos, this doesn't seem like a very big deal. They're waiting in anticipation of the bridegroom who's coming for his bride to take her back to his own home. These bridesmaids didn't bring any extra oil with them, and when the bridegroom arrives later than anticipated, throwing everybody's schedule off, the bridesmaids who did bring extra oil make this not-very-helpful suggestion: just go out and find an oil dealer – in the middle of the night! -- and buy your own. Which they do.

But when they get back, the party is in full swing, the doors are locked, and the bridegroom, who doesn't know them, won't let them in. So what exactly is the sin here? Whose fault is this crisis anyway?

At first blush, I blame the bridegroom for two reasons. First, he's late. What is it about bridegrooms that they are almost always late? You give them a time and they don't show up for 30 minutes thereafter. This one finally shows up – at midnight! -- completely oblivious to the fact that his tardiness has caused a bridesmaid crisis. And second, when the bridesmaids finally get back, he won't let them in. He could be the whole reason for this unnecessary drama but he takes no responsibility for it.

But I also blame the other bridesmaids as well. Not only are they selfish with their oil, they also set up the bridesmaids who didn't bring any extra oil. Their suggestion to go out into the city -- at night -- to find an oil dealer, is a terrible idea! It's dangerous out there, and no oil dealer in his right mind will be open in the middle of the night. Doesn't Christian charity teach us that those who have the oil should share it with those who have none? So, clearly, this parable is not a lesson about Christian charity.

Yet the story doesn't appear to blame either the insensitivity of the bridegroom or the selfishness of the "wise" bridesmaids who thought to bring extra oil. No! The story leads us to conclude that it is the so-called "foolish" bridesmaids who should bear the blame for the outcome of this story, and that bothers me -- I don't like it.

After all, who here has not been guilty of poor planning at one time or another? Who here hasn't found themselves in the wrong place? ...At the wrong time? ...On the wrong side of a locked door? We all make mistakes sometimes, right? If you're lucky, you just forgot to pack a towel and you can run to the store when you get there -- unless you're on a mission trip to rural Costa Rica and there isn't a store for miles....

If we're lucky, someone with a sense of mercy -- or a sense of humor -- sympathizes with our plight and we are rescued -- sort of. But there is no grace here and no humor. Five bridesmaids are locked out of the party.

So what gives here? Now, I don't have any great wisdom, but here's a little story that provides us with some insight. There was a wedding that had been preceded by a big party the night before. The best man, whose job it was to hold the rings for the bride and the groom, was feeling the after-effects. The first part of the wedding service passed without incident, and the minister finished his meditation with a flourish.

The organist began a musical interlude that ended up being much longer than intended. You see, as the organist began to play, the best man turned an peculiar shade of green, whispered, "I'm going to be sick," and rushed out of the sanctuary, making a beeline for the men's room, and taking the rings with him.

The music went on -- and on, while the wedding party waited -- and waited. Finally, an usher realized that somebody should do something and went in after him. Looking very pale and disheveled, the best man reappeared with the rings. After the wedding -- and rightly so, in my opinion -- he incurred the wrath of the wedding party,

especially the mother of the bride. After all, he had one job to do – one! -- and at the critical moment he abandoned his post.

And there it is: one insight to understanding this parable. These foolish bridesmaids didn't go wrong by failing to bring extra oil; and it wasn't their fault that they fell asleep. Everybody had, but check this out. They had one job to do: to welcome the bridegroom with joy. And when the critical moment arrived, they were nowhere to be found! Like our hungover best man, they had abandoned their post.

Sure, they might have been foolish; they assumed that their task was to have oil in their lamps, and to find some if they didn't. But that wasn't their job at all. The oil was a means to an end, and I'm not sure it was even a necessary one.

Their job was to welcome the bridegroom and to communicate joy. Their job was to be the heralds of unbelievably good news. But they got caught up in the details of preparation and they forgot why they were there – what they were preparing for. By confusing the means with the ends, they failed in their task.

On one hand, we might see this parable as a veiled criticism of the religious authorities: the scribes and the Pharisees, and the hypocrisy that we talked about last week. Their task was not to keep the temple beautiful or profitable; rather their chief task was to keep the people connected with God and to greet the promised arrival of God with joy. But they saw Jesus as a nuisance -- interfering with the profitability of the temple – or even a threat to its well-being. They had confused the means with the ends; indeed, they ended up sacrificing the ends to the means. In their anxiety to keep their lamps burning, they abandoned their posts. They did not welcome Jesus Christ with joy.

On the other hand, what are this parable's implications for us, today? Is our task to preserve our religion or to communicate the joy of knowing Jesus Christ, the joy of his victory over sin and guilt and death; the joy of his presence here with us.

Let me ask you: Do our lives, our congregations, and our denominations radiate the joy of knowing Christ? Do people see us and think, “I want to be like that!” In the 12-step program they have a saying: “If you want what we have, and are willing to go to any lengths to get it...” So why don’t people want what we have?

In a nation where so many people believe in God and are on spiritual quests, why are the churches in decline? I have no scientific evidence whatsoever, but I think it boils down to joy. It’s not that people object to our beliefs. It’s that they object our joylessness. They do not see us taking intense pleasure in our faith or in our church. They hear us wishing we could sleep in on Sunday, or leave early. They are searching for joy in their difficulties, and they don’t see it in church.

What does our joylessness look like? In general, Christians spend far too much time criticizing each other and highlighting each other's faults. Alice Roosevelt once said, "If you can't say anything nice about someone, sit right here by me." Conservatives and liberals, evangelicals and mainliners, Catholics and Orthodox—they spend their energy focusing on the other guys’ faults. I know because I do it – I have a bad habit of looking down on the more conservative denominations.

In larger settings, our joylessness often looks like conflict over worship styles. This is an issue we haven’t had to deal with much, but remember this for when we do... It’s not worship style that draws people into the presence of the living, loving God, but the joy they feel when they’re here. When we make an idol out of any particular style of worship, we fail.

And finally, the world is desperate for good news, both in word and deed, but we get so absorbed with criticism, the manipulation of power, empty conversations about contemporary versus traditional music, and so many other petty details, that our good news – if had any – is drowned out by our own voices of discontent.

Maybe that's why it's so hard to find people willing to volunteer for stuff. Remember that meaningful service brings joy. Joy brings energy for even more profound and meaningful service, and more joy.

Like the foolish bridesmaids, we might be a little unprepared, but I think we, too, have forgotten what we're supposed to be prepared for. We've lost track of our primary task, and have become absorbed by secondary matters. We have abandoned our post. We need to be less worried about the oil and more about the light – about spreading the joy, so that everyone, both inside and outside the house are filled with joy as well.

Is your lamp full? Don't bother to check it – it is. It's full to overflowing! Jesus said that he came that we could have life and have it abundantly. And, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full."

The good news in this parable is that the bridesmaids never have to go looking for the bridegroom. The bridegroom has already come. The joy that God gives to us is already here, walking through the door, sitting next to us. We just need to stay put and fling open the doors, stretch our arms wide to joy approaching, and to realize that receiving joy and giving joy are what life is all about. It's not about possessions, power, wealth, and position. It's about joy. Are you ready? If the person next to you doesn't have enough oil in their lamp, sit a little closer.

Amen.