

“Wisdom while Waiting”
by Rev. Frances Savill
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Matthew 25:1-13

“The kingdom of heaven will be like this.”

With these words Jesus began his second of 4 parables about the end of the age and the coming Kingdom of God. Each of the 4 parables paints a picture of what it will be like when the Kingdom of God comes in all its fullness. Each parable addresses an issue or problem God’s people face as we wait for Jesus’ return.

Over these next 3 weeks we’re going to be looking at these parables in sequence, but these parables are not completely separate from one another. They are one whole unit that helps us see and understand the day that is coming, the consummation of human history, and the time when all the nations of the earth will be gathered before the triumphant Son of Man to be judged.

The parables help to interpret one another, and in the parables, we hear echoes of other scriptures from Matthew’s gospel, and from the whole of the Bible. Our parable begins with 10 young women, virgins, bridesmaids, 5 were foolish and 5 were wise. Now some of you might still be wondering how we’re going to cover 4 parables in 3 weeks, and others may have noted that we are already on parable #2. Parable #1 isn’t part of the lectionary readings, but I’m going to make a couple of points about it.

It is the parable of the wise and the foolish servants. That parable and the parable of the 10 bridesmaids are sort of book ends that balance each other. In the parable of the two servants the problem is that the master arrives sooner than expected, in the parable of the 10 bridesmaids the problem is that the master, the bridegroom is delayed.

The parable of the 2 servants begins with a wise and faithful servant, and a wicked one. These are the kinds of categories that the bridesmaids are divided into. There are 5 wise and 5 foolish.

The concept of wisdom, in the Biblical understanding, equates to faithfulness, and foolishness equates to wickedness. The Psalmist cried out to God “teach me to number my days so that I might gain wisdom of heart.” Our parables are about knowing, or in this case not knowing the number of days we have until Jesus’ return.

The proverb says, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” These parables call us to the fear of the Lord, a reverence, an awe, a holy fear, before our Lord who is going to return, and before whom each of us are going to appear and be called to account.

Wisdom is learned from following God’s law and keeping God’s commands. It’s learned as we learn to obey God’s word. Wisdom is not head knowledge, it’s righteous living, faithfully walking in God’s ways.

In the parable of the 2 servants, the wise servant is found doing the work he was left to do. The Lord said to him, “feed the household.” That’s what he did. Likewise, the foolish/wicked servant didn’t do what the master left him to do. His foolishness and wickedness were revealed in his actions. Instead of feeding the household, he abused other servants and hung around with the drunkards.

In the parable of the Bridesmaids, we don’t know what makes one group wise and the other foolish until the end. There is a crisis because the bridegroom is delayed in returning. All the bridesmaids went out to meet the groom. All experienced the same delay, all slept, but in the end only the wise were ready to meet the bridegroom when he came. The Bridesmaid’s purpose was to light the way, usually for the bride, but in Jesus’ story, it’s for the groom. Their whole reason for being bridesmaids was for the time of lighting the way, kicking off the joyous celebrations, and then joining in the feast and celebrating with the bride and groom.

Jesus is teaching us about his time, but Matthew has recorded this parable to teach the church. Most of Jesus’ parables are about him and his situation. The bridegroom is Jesus, the Son of Man, who will be returning. The bridesmaids are the church, all those who are ready to welcome our returning Lord. We are all

called to be ready whenever the cry goes out and have lamps that are ready to burn brightly ready to go. The banquet is the celebration at the end of time, the coming kingdom of God in all its joy and fullness.

The crisis came, in Jesus' parable, and in the church, when the bridegroom is delayed. The wise bridesmaids brought extra oil; they were prepared for the delay. The foolish young women didn't and ran out of oil when they went to relight their lamps. So, with lamps sputtering they went out into the night to buy more oil.

While they were away the bridegroom returned. They missed the moment they had been waiting for. When the foolish ones finally showed up at the feast, the banquet celebration, the door was locked, and it was too late.

Jesus' words to them are hard to hear. "Lord, Lord," they said, "open the door." "I never knew you", was the reply. We hear echoes from earlier in Matthew's gospel when Jesus said that not everyone who called "Lord, Lord" would enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who did the will of his Father in heaven.

So, what is the oil that we need not to run out of? How do we make sure that we are not caught short? The parable doesn't tell us. Often the oil has been interpreted as good works. The only problem with that is that none of the bridesmaids work through the night, they all sleep, and none are criticized for that.

In the parable before, with the 2 servants, the wise servant does the work the master left him to do. It's described as feeding the household. That means feeding hungry people a good dinner. It also means teaching hungry souls the good news of the gospel, comforting hurting souls with acts of compassion, offering hospitality to strangers, visiting those in hospital and prison.

The Master's charge is a little different for each one of us. Feeding the household is about faithfully doing and being who and what God has called us to be, and together doing and being who God has called us to be as the church.

The bridesmaids had one job, light the way, and the wise made the preparations so that whenever the bridegroom came, they'd be ready. In this parable the issue was that Jesus was not returning as quickly as some people thought he should. In the parable of the 2 servants, the problem for the wicked servant was that the master came back too soon, sooner than expected. It seems that the wicked servant didn't really expect the master to return.

Tom Long, in his commentary on Matthew, writes:

When the church stops expecting God and begins only to expect "church", this inevitably breeds discouragement, conflict, and a slackening of mission. When church no longer anticipates God at any minute, when the church no longer expects to have it's work validated by the advent of the kingdom, then it ceases to be a kingdom community and becomes a self-contained institution living only for today and competing within itself for power and status. When the church no longer saves a place at the table for the coming messiah, then it ceases to feed others and simply begins to gorge itself."

The Lord is going to return. Scripture promises are true. The wise ones in the church are those who are prepared for Jesus to come at any hour.

It is those who hold on to their faith deep into the night, even though they see no bridegroom coming, who still serve and hope and pray and wait for the promised victory of God. The ones who keep their eye on the goal, remembering their purpose, remembering what they are to do and are ready to do it.

Many will finally despair and turn away in discouragement saying, "The bridegroom left us standing at the altar, the banquet is off, there is no kingdom, life is just one cursed thing after another with no goal or end.

The foolish are not ready. They have taken their eye off the goal and aren't prepared. Suddenly in the middle of history's long night, when the world least expects it, a cry will go up,

*"Look! Here is the bridegroom!
Here at last, the long-expected Jesus.
Come out to meet him."* (Tom Long Matthew p. 281)