

November 12, 2017
Pentecost 23
Wisdom 6:12-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 22:1-13
Got Oil?
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Fellow Ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ,
Gracia y paz del Dio; Padre, Hijo e Espirito Santo
Grace to you and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Five years ago, I was frantic to complete final papers for five classes at seminary. With only 6 weeks until the end of the term, I stared at blank page after blank page hoping for inspiration on the subjects of American Lutheranism, Preaching the Gospel of Luke, History of Christianity, Liturgy and Spirituality and the ever-popular Systematic Theology.

My classmates were bemoaning their pile of papers, also. But there was something different about their lament. They were tormented by the prospect of 10 or 12 unfinished assignments. We were in the same classes! How could they have twice as many papers to complete? Ohhhhh! They were still working on papers that had been due weeks before. They were late! I shared this with my mentor who wisely counseled me "there's no such thing as a late sermon".

In first century Palestine, there was no such thing as an unprepared bride. Understanding wedding practices of the first century will help us understand today's parable and the entire context of Advent, which is quickly approaching.

When a Jewish man chose his bride, his father met with the bride's father to propose the marriage. They discussed the details of the union including the price the groom was offering for the bride and the size of the bride's dowry. If the two fathers agreed to the "deal", the two men sealed the agreement with a toast of wine. The bride was invited into the room. The groom publicly proclaimed his love for her and asked her to be his bride. If the bride-to-be accepted his proposal, the groom presented her with a gift, usually a ring, in the presence of at least two witnesses, saying, "Behold you are consecrated unto me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel."

A written contract was prepared listing the time, place and size of the wedding and the terms of the dowry. The bride kept this binding document called a "ketubah", until the consummation of the marriage. The "Shiddukhin", or engagement ended with a toast. The bride and groom were considered "espoused" or "betrothed". Just like Mary and Joseph were before she became pregnant. They were committed to each other just as if they were already married. There were two events yet to take place. First, the formal "huppah" ceremony and second the intimate consummation of their union. The only one way to break this contract of betrothal was a bill of divorce.

Hang in there, this is important to our understanding of Jesus' parable and how it relates to us.

When the engagement ceremony was over, the groom promised his bride that he would build a home for her and then he left to prepare a place for her in his father's house. This could take up to a year, maybe more. The bride was expected to spend the time in preparation for marriage. Not just physical preparations of clothing and household items. She lived for the day of his return. Because there was no set time for his return, the bride and her entire household were on constant alert for the shout from the members of the wedding party that would signal the arrival of the groom.

Is this starting to sound like today's entrance hymn? It should.
*Rejoice, rejoice, believers, and let your lights appear.
The evening is advancing, and darker night is near.
The Bridegroom is arising, and soon He draweth nigh.
Up, pray, and watch, and wrestle: At midnight comes the cry.*

The typical Jewish wedding took place at night. Members of the wedding were assigned to watch for torches that would signaling the groom's approach. Their shouts could be heard echoing in the quiet streets, "The bridegroom is coming, "Shouts rippled along the way as the groom's entourage made its way to the bride's home. At the first alert, the excited bride dropped everything, slipped into her wedding dress and made her final preparations for the marriage ceremony.

The bride came out to meet the groom. OK, so, you get the allegory, here. Jesus Christ is the bridegroom; we are the wedding party, preparing and waiting for his return. But, what's the point? When I heard this parable as a child I was afraid to go to sleep because I was sure I'd miss Jesus' second coming. I didn't want to be one of the foolish bridesmaids, any more than I wanted to be a foolish, unprepared student in seminary.

So here's the thing about these wise and foolish wedding attendants. Both are foolish and both are wise. The wise attendants are smug in their preparedness, while the foolish rush off for oil, and miss the party.

And here's the thing about these final three Sundays of the church year: We come face to face with the Parousia – the return of Jesus. We are confronted with our foolish wisdom. You see, this is not a tale of oil, or lack thereof. This is a tale that asks, "what are you doing while you wait?" http://www.oasistradepost.com/Weddings/_weddings_.html

This parable is not about praising the wise bridesmaids or judging the foolish ones. Jesus says that this parable is meant to teach us about the Reign of God. About the Kingdom of Heaven. The same message we have heard from other parables in recent months the "Weeds and the Wheat" (Matthew 13:24-30) the "Parable of the Wedding Banquet" (Matthew 22:11-14) Using parables, Jesus has been teaching us that the Reign of God is not always easy to see in the midst of a complex and difficult world. Not everyone is going to "get" it. Some will openly resist the message of hope, and promise and Good News. I am often dumbfounded when the people around me miss what seems so obvious Like "God loves you!" And just as often I am dumbfounded when I miss that obvious truth. Sometimes I see the Reign of God breaking in all around me. And sometimes I wonder where God is in the midst of the insanity of the world.

When someone guns down 26 people in their house of worship, 58 people at a concert, 58 people at a nightclub, or dozens of people nightly on the streets of our cities, the Reign of God seems horribly distant. Yet, when I gather with community leaders who are working for peace, justice and reconciliation in the world And when I gather with you at this banquet table, prepared by the Prince of Peace I see glimmers of the Kingdom shimmering in the night.

Jesus never leaves us standing foolishly on the doorstep of the Kingdom with empty lamps and dying flames. Jesus tells us what to do. "Keep awake,"

See that your lamps are burning; replenish them with oil.

And wait for your salvation, the end of earthly toil.

The watchers on the mountain proclaim the Bridegroom near.

Go meet Him as He cometh, with alleluias clear.

Use everything that God has placed in your hands for God's service. Care for hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. Teach others about God's command to love God and love our neighbor. Invite people to join us on the way. Jesus has opened the door to the Reign of God for all –yes, even foolish procrastinators – by dying on a cross and rising again on the third day. This is the promise, the act of divine love that keeps our lamps full and our lights burning even in the darkest of nights.

Our hope and expectation, O Jesus, now appear!

Arise, Thou Sun so longed for, over this benighted sphere!

With hearts and hands uplifted, we plead, O Lord, to see

The day of earth's redemption that brings us unto Thee.

Thanks be to God!