

22 Pentecost – A
Amos 5:18-24
Psalm 70
Matthew 25:1-13

Some of you may know Kathy Donley. She's the American Baptist pastor at Emmanuel in Albany. Well, she, Peter and I sat in the parlor on Tuesday afternoon discussing the gospel at the new lectionary study group that meets here on Tuesdays.

Peter just kept saying he was really glad he didn't have to preach on this parable today because he was already up to his neck in wedding talk, what with his son's wedding this weekend in Chicago that he was getting ready to attend.

Kathy and I just kept saying that we didn't understand why the bridesmaids—both the so-called wise ones and the so-called foolish ones—acted the way they did. On the other hand, what did we know? Neither one of us had ever been one—always the pastor, never the bridesmaid. Alas, who knows? Maybe we'd have been just like the wise ones (stingy about sharing the oil) or stupid (going off to buy oil just as the bridegroom arrives). Nah, I don't think so.

So the three of us, Peter, Kathy and I, all agreed that this is a terrible parable and that the author of the gospel of Matthew hadn't been listening very closely to what Jesus said. Anybody who has seen "The Life of Brian" knows that mistakes can be made. In that brilliant movie, those gathered at the far end of the crowd for The Sermon on the Mount think that Jesus says "Blessed are the cheese makers." And one listener assures another, "Oh, by that I'm sure he means all persons in the dairy industry."

But whether or not the author of Matthew misconstrued Jesus' meaning in this parable, it's here and we have to deal with it. But there are some problems with it.

Remember last week, for All Saints Sunday we heard the beatitudes from The Sermon on the Mount? Well, I found this fascinating quote by Dr. Anna Carter Florence, professor of preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia. Here she reflects on the contrast between Beatitudes and the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. She writes:

For example, what would happen if we placed Matthew 25 next to other portions of Matthew's gospel, and read them together? What would this parable have to say to those passages? Well, I tried that here, starting with the Sermon on the Mount back in Matthew 6 and 7, but I didn't get very far, because the wise and foolish bridesmaids were making mincemeat out of the Beatitudes. I was coming up with rewrites like this:

(Matthew 6:19ff) Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, although to get there, you will need large

oil reserves, so forget the first part of what I said; store up for yourselves oil on earth, so that you will have treasure in heaven. Or (Matthew 6:25ff) Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body what you will wear. Worry about your oil; that's the main thing. Worry about whether you have enough for you, and forget about everyone else; they are not your problem. Or (Matthew 7:7ff) Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you, unless of course you're late and the bridegroom answers, in which case, you might as well forget it. Or (Matthew 7:12ff) In everything do unto others as you would have them do to you. In everything, that is, except oil, which changes all the rules.

Okay, you get the point. But how are we to read and understand this parable, then? Quite possibly you were taught that this was a kind of an allegory for the way we ought to behave. At a quick reading it may seem a kind of blueprint for doing good deeds and thereby earning a place within the Bridegroom's favor. And the Bridegroom, it's easy to assume, is Jesus.

But is he, really? After all, the Bridegroom isn't a very nice guy. He closes the door on half of his closest friends. He shuts them out. He shrinks from hospitality. He even claims not to know them. That's pretty harsh.

Does that really sound like the Jesus who said "I am the way, the truth and the life"? The Jesus who said, "I am the gate"? Does that sound like the Jesus who said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

No, it really doesn't. And furthermore, we need to scratch the surface of this parable a little further. Most scholars believe that Jesus' original

parable only went as far as verse 10. Verses 11-13, they believe, were added on by Matthew to try to legislate good behavior. So verse 10 reads, “And while they went to buy the oil, the Bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet and the door was shut.”

The story doesn't really end when we read it just through verse 10. There's no resolution. We know that more action is slated to follow. The Bridegroom shuts the door, but so what? There are still five bridesmaids wandering around out there!

I'm going to propose that we do something unexpected with this story. Instead of reading it as a parable that exhorts its hearers to be prepared spiritually for the return of Christ, instead of just assuming that the Bridegroom is Jesus, let's take a minute to look at how we read scripture.

Martin Luther taught his students that when we go faithfully into scripture, we go as detectives, using our head and our hearts. We search for that which reveals what we know to be true about Christ.

And what do we know about Christ? That he was the one who, in love, died in order that *we* may die to the old, exclusionary ways of being and rise to the newness of an inclusive forgiving love. In reading scripture in a contemporary context—if we indeed believe scripture to be inspired and

disclosing wisdom still—then we must look at it through the lens of crucified and risen Christ.

So it may well be that the author of Matthew, who was trying desperately to bring order to the early, emerging church, knew that people were worried about the return of Christ. It may well be that he recorded this as a parable of exhortation to be prepared for Christ’s return.

But when we read the parable in light of what we know about Jesus and if we only read it through verse 10, as most scholars believe is the way Jesus told it, we end up with a closed door and five bridesmaids wandering in the middle of the night. We can’t ignore that.

Because at this point, the drama of the story depends more on the Bridegroom’s actions than on any perceived “wisdom” or “foolishness” on the part of all those bridesmaids. Reading the parable just to verse ten, we recognize that this way the story is more about hospitality offered and hospitality withheld. The Bridegroom behaves inhospitably. He stands on one side of a closed door.

Here’s what I think we can trust about Jesus: He stands on the other side of that closed door. Jesus is not the Bridegroom. Jesus is outside—as he always was outside in his public ministry—standing on the side of those

who are excluded, those who are shut out. Jesus is outside with the lost sheep, the wandering bridesmaids, the outcast women, the tax collectors. Jesus is outside with the crowds, with the children, with the lepers, with the sick and the poor.

Jesus, spreading life abundantly and God's love far afield, changes the paradigm. It is not the wise bridesmaids' *preparedness* that will save them. Nor is it the *unpreparedness* of the foolish bridesmaids that will lead to condemnation. God's love is not something we control or restrict. It is not something we deserve or jeopardize by our mistakes. Instead, God's will of love has free reign. And when we look for Jesus in this parable, I don't think we find him at the sumptuous banquet table; I think we find him out in the byways where the lost ones wander.

The foolish bridesmaids are maybe not so foolish after all. They remind us that we can never *make ourselves* ready to receive God, but are always surprised by grace, and therefore wholly dependent on it.

God opens the door to us and not to a wedding banquet, but to a whole new and abundant life. God invites us to a feast and promises us life eternal. God gives us food for our bodies, lamps for our souls and the communion of the whole gathered body of Christ where no one is shut out.

Amen.

