

LAMPS, BRIGHT WITH A FRAGRANT HOPE

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Matthew 25:1—13

This morning I invite you to pray with the following scene from the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew’s gospel. Here, we listen as Jesus speaks to his followers of a heavenly virtue, illustrated by a group of (rather human sounding) women before a (rather human sounding) wedding. I am sure you are familiar with the scene.

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no

*oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'"*¹

Marriage and all the communal, ritual activity that accompany it appear throughout human history and across cultures. There is always something of this familiar humanity in each of the parables Jesus tells; something plain and recognizable to the human heart, regardless of time or place. The imagery is at once as mundane and domestic as a drowsy delay and a panicked visit to the oil dealers; at the same time, it is elaborately textured and multifaceted, always somehow pointing beyond itself, like the fine embroidery of a hand-stitched wedding gown or the warm glow and fragrant aroma of a lit oil lamp.

¹ Matthew 25:1–8

Weddings are paradoxical in this way. For this reason, Jesus's use of wedding or marriage imagery can sometimes be startling—especially since he almost always uses it to describe the end of things, the final consummation of God's desire for us.

From one vantage, weddings are enactments of some of our highest ideals and spiritual aspirations. Communities, families, and individuals come together to bridge the chasm of otherness; life-long vows of commitment, charity, and forbearance are declared; two people promise to walk in love with their mutual incompleteness and fragility. Weddings participate in the warm glow and fragrant aroma of a divine mystery and a *heavenly* virtue.

And still, from another equally compelling vantage, weddings are also some of the messiest displays of our fragile, self-centered humanity. Popular television shows like *Bridezilla* or *The Bachelor* make much of the hyperbole, stress, and illusions that have become synonymous with weddings in our culture. Yet I suspect that, despite the cultural remove, the culture

through which Jesus moved likely knew a similar tension expressed in a different set of signs. While none of the weddings I have ever attended or witnessed required lamps for a sunset vigil as the groom made his way through the village toward the home of the bride,² I have seen the look of panic that runs through a bridal party when the dress doesn't fit, or the caterer botches the menu, or the groom doesn't show. Then as now, weddings can lay bare the shared disorder of our common humanity and our *common* "virtues."

My beloved late mother was a tailor, specializing in wedding gowns. Growing up, I crossed paths with many wedding parties. Brides, grooms, groomsmen, parents, and yes, bridesmaids. Much like the bridesmaids we encounter in Jesus' parable this morning, I remember that it was always impossible to tell by simply looking at them whether any member or members in a wedding party were "wise" or "foolish." "All ten [bridesmaids]," writes Eugene

² See <https://biblicalwordpictures.wordpress.com/2011/11/28/jewish-wedding-imagery-and-the-new-testament/>

Boring, “have come to the wedding, all ten have their lamps aglow with expectation; all ten, presumably, are wearing their bridesmaid gowns. We would never guess from appearances that half are wise and half are foolish.”³

Sure, from time to time my mother and I indulged and made predictions based on our observations and early formed judgements. Nevertheless, just because a bride or group of bridesmaids looked like they might behave one way never guaranteed that our judgements were at all accurate. A bride whose initial impression left us wondering if she could handle the demands of the event she was planning could astonish us with her acuity and resourcefulness when the inevitable cataclysms of “the big day” arose. Equally, a bride who initially impressed in consultation could very well wind up mentally “locked out” of her own wedding due to stress, delays, and things generally not going her way.

³ M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 8:451.

What is the difference, then, between the foolishness of one group and the wisdom of the other in Jesus's parable? All ten, as Boring observes, are dressed and present, lamps lit, and anticipation abounds. The difference is a matter of readiness, but not just any kind of readiness.

We cannot say that the wise readiness displayed by the five wise bridesmaids arises out of any nervousness or concern about the details of the bridegroom's arrival—they fall asleep just like the five foolish bridesmaids. They don't read the horizon for signs of his coming, abandon their lamps at the bridegroom's delay, or make speculations about his progress and their predicament. They instead rest in the knowledge of their duty, ready to perform it at the appropriate time, whenever that might happen to be.

Yet we cannot likewise say that the heavenly wisdom on display is the product of cynicism or pessimism. **The virtue of their readiness is hope.** The wise bridesmaids trust that the bridegroom *will* arrive.

They know that the light entrusted to them *will* be required when he comes to meet them. And still they allow for the fact that the desired event may not happen as expected or at their convenience. The five bridesmaids without flasks of oil are not foolish because they fell asleep or even because they forgot to bring flasks of oil; the foolishness is displayed in their anticipation that things would go *one way*: the way they had expected, in a way that was convenient for them.

Whether we are tending to the humanity of a wedding, living with the results of an election, waiting through the difficulties of a pandemic, or just trying to get along with our neighbors, it is generally easier to try and live aglow with peace and charity for a short while, particularly when it suites us, when we are excited, when it is convenient.

It is an altogether different and more difficult undertaking to live in a wise anticipation of the Kingdom for a lifetime. When the Kingdom seems delayed, when things don't go out way, wisdom—

radiant and unfading—stands waiting at the gate, ready to teach us a hopeful anticipation. To live a hopeful anticipation fragrant with the oil of our baptism, mysteriously domestic and familiar yet aglow with the lights of hope, love, and charity. To live that hopeful anticipation wisely enough to know we may not see the object of our hope's desire this side of our mortality, while we nonetheless ready our lamps, test the quality of their light, and ensure a nearness to the oil by which we were marked as Christ's own. Lamps of the image of God, bright with a wise anticipation.

Amen.