

Matthew 25 Be Prepared

When I have read this parable in the past I have almost always viewed it through the lens of the Boy Scout motto—"Be prepared." In my translation of the text this parable is titled the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. In the both KJV and NIV translations, the literal meaning of the Greek—virgins is used. Other traditions title it the Parable of the Wise and the Foolish Bridesmaids. The story that is told is simple, but involves some very unfamiliar elements connected to a wedding—we haven't much experience with oil lamps. The tradition of bridesmaids or virgins either wise or foolish "going out to meet the bridegroom" isn't a feature typical of modern weddings...bridesmaids are attendants of the bride, not the groom. So where in this story about a wedding do we look for our message for today about the wisdom or foolishness of those who went to meet the bridegroom. There are also several elements in the story which seem disturbing—the wise won't share and the late comers to the wedding are locked out. Neither of these things seems to be consistent with the teachings of Jesus or the grace of God. For us to discern the message, we need to understand the context of the story which would have been obvious to the original audience. The story itself begins by describing a standard First Century Galilean wedding which occurred at night. In that time and place, the bridegroom had to go to the home of the bride's family to fetch her. And that wasn't just a simple arrive and then leave process. He couldn't leave the bride's house until some formalities were dealt with. There was the bride's price to be fixed and a dowry to be paid. After the agreements were reached, there were celebratory toasts to be drunk and then and only then, could the couple joyfully go to the house of the groom's family for the remainder of the wedding to take place..for the wedding feast. The function of these bridesmaids was to wait outside of the bride's home, oil lamps ready, and when the bride and groom emerged. They then led the couple and illuminated the exuberant procession through the dark streets of the village. In this story, ten bridesmaids take their lamps and go take up their positions waiting to meet the bridegroom and lead the procession to the site of the wedding banquet. The ten are immediately divided into two groups, the wise who not only bring their lamps but some extra oil and the foolish who only bring their filled lamps. The expectation is that their wait will not be long, but in this case there is a glitch. Whether the dowry negotiations have stalled or there were more toasts raised than usual, something causes the bridegroom's appearance to be delayed. Now the wise bridesmaids must have been familiar with the Boy Scout manual, because they were prepared if there was a delay. The foolish discover this unexpected delay has caused a problem. The last verse with its: "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour," points readers toward a message of watchfulness...an always on alert status. It suggests that the foolish bridesmaids were not sufficiently prepared for what occurred. The point however is not really constant readiness. "Keep awake" does not imply that the disciples should never sleep, standing vigil through the ages for Christ's imminent return. In fact, it is pointed out that all of the bridesmaids have fallen asleep while waiting. What is distinctive about this parable is its focus on the delayed return of the expected one. The passage does not simply call for right action in the groom's absence. It calls for recognition that he may be delayed. This is related to the early believers expectation that Jesus would return immediately. This was phrased this way in Seminary—It is Thursday today, and Jesus is returning again on Saturday. They anticipated a very short wait for Christ's return. In this parable alone, the wise

or prudent disciple is the one who prepares not only for the groom's return, but also for his delay. If the groom is coming quickly there would be nothing wrong with taking one's lamp full of oil to meet him, but no extra. But the wise disciple packs a supply of oil, knowing that the wait time may be unpredictable. Jesus seems to be trying to prepare his followers for the delay because the bridesmaids are warned in the last verse: Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. This is often taken to refer to the time when Christ will return and the kingdom will be fully present as being unknowable. It is difficult for many of today's disciples to be anything like the bridesmaids, wise or foolish, because we have stopped waiting. We give little thought to Christ's return because over the centuries many prophets of doom have claimed knowledge and the passage of time has proven them wrong. We also give little thought to what actions we should do to be prepared for possibility the return is actually immanent. The wait has been so long, we have gotten used to the bridegroom's absence. For centuries our time has been part of what is termed the "in-between-time", the time that has happened since Jesus entered into historical time and the time called Kairos which is God's time and when the kingdom will be fully present. This parable asks us to imagine ourselves as those bridesmaids waiting outside the bride's home expecting the bridegroom to emerge soon so that the wedding feast may begin. If we picture not the wait for the final coming of the kingdom as our only role, but rather see ourselves looking expectantly around us to see where God is entering in our world now, how does that change the call to keep awake? What if we view this parable as a call to live in a way that is always alert to all the ways God may come to us and call us to follow—not just in the by and by, but in the here and now. Viewed this way, the parable says that we Christians are like those bridesmaids camped outside the bride's house. Waiting—maybe awake, maybe asleep—for the moment when God may come and call us to rise and follow—when we may be sent to minister—to proclaim—to witness. Although this parable is about waiting—it is about a special type of waiting--it is about expectant waiting—and so there is a sense of urgency found within it. The original expectation of the bridegroom stepping out defines a moment of action—action which calls for readiness. Our lives in this time—this in-between time---also calls for readiness—the readiness to respond to the situations of our world in the manner expected of us as disciples. Although we do not know the day or the hour, what we do know is Jesus promised he would return. Part of our expectant waiting is tied to our assurance, our affirmation of the surety of the return and what that means. When he does, then the feast may begin—righteousness and praise will spring up as human unfaithfulness will fade away. This promise as described in Revelation 21: 3-4 states "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." The wedding feast anticipated initiates the reign of God's justice and mercy, the realization of all the hopes of humankind. To act as wise bridesmaids is to affirm our faith in the sure coming Christ. Doing so shows our trust that God is a God of justice and mercy. The eschaton pictured by Isaiah and in Revelation encapsulates the ideals of God's reign. It is the vision against which we judge our efforts in the meantime to live according to God's principles. Additionally, our preparation involves how we prepare for the judgment which also comes. The oil for our lamps, the way we keep the light shining is also an aspect of our expectant and confident waiting. We trust that God is a God of justice and mercy and that he desires us to be people of

justice and mercy. We are called to witness by our lives to the light given to us—to keep our lamps burning—to fill them with actions that witness to the life of discipleship we are called to live while we wait. As you are probably aware, last Sunday, at this same hour a tragic event took place in a small church in a small town in Texas. This week, on the web page of the Presbyterian magazine Outlook, a hymn was posted written in response to that event. When reading the passage from the Hebrew Scripture this morning, I heard an echo about the Matthews parable. The people of Israel had fallen asleep with regard to their covenant promises. They were still attending church so to speak, but they were no longer living as God's people. God had the prophet Amos describe the day of the coming of the Lord not in terms of a joyful feast to anticipate, but a day of darkness to dread. The reason Amos views it this way is found in verses 21-24: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." This newly written hymn tells it this way: If we just talk of thoughts and prayers and don't live out a faith that dares, and don't take on the ways of death, our thoughts and prayers are fleeting breath. If we just dream of what could be and do not build community, and do not seek to change our ways, our dreams of change are false displays. If we just sing of doing good and don't walk through our neighborhood to learn the hope, to ease its pain, our talk of good is simply vain. God, may our prayers and dreams and songs lead to a faith that takes on wrongs—that works for peace and justice, too. Then will our prayers bring joy to you. To me, these lyrics describe how we stay prepared for Christ's coming—how we keep our lamps lit with actions which bring joy to our Lord. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.