

Mar. 31, 2019 – (Lent 4, The Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids)

Sermon Text – Matthew 25:1-13

- [Jesus said], "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 bridegroom came...those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." -

I'd have to say that Jesus really liked weddings; or, at least, he thought that we could learn a lot from them. Last week, we heard his Parable of the Wedding Banquet. Today, we have another parable drawn from the tradition of weddings, the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids. The first thing we need to know, however, is that weddings in biblical times were not like weddings today. They were much less about formal ceremony and much more about practical reality. In New Testament times, vows were exchanged as part of the "betrothal." That's equivalent to the time in which the couple got engaged. But it was more than an engagement. It was the formation of a legally binding contract. After the betrothal, it took a divorce to break off the engagement. The wedding was the announcement to the world that the couple was now ready to begin living their life together. The groom would come, in procession with his friends, to the home of the bride's parents, pick her up, together with her entourage of friends, and take her to his house, where the partying and feasting would begin. Often, this would happen in the evening. Hence, the bridesmaids are prepared with oil in their lamps to light the way to the bridegroom's house where the wedding festivities will begin.

Under normal circumstances, there is no problem; but, in Jesus' parable, the bridegroom's arrival is delayed. No reason is given for this glitch in the process, but it is understandable. Maybe the bridegroom is getting "cold feet." Maybe the best man didn't show. Maybe the chef is having problems with the fatted calf. Maybe any number of things could go wrong. I'm sure that brides and grooms fretted no less over all the arrangements for their weddings in biblical times than they do today. Because the bridegroom is delayed, the wait gets long. The bridesmaids fall asleep. The groom doesn't arrive until midnight. I know more than a few parents who would be way past done waiting by then. This marriage would be over. But all is finally ready to proceed. And now, suddenly, the foolish bridesmaids realize that they should have brought extra oil for their lamps. They are beginning to run out. When they ask if they can borrow

some from the wise ones, who have brought extra with them, they are told “No, for then there may not be enough for any of us. Better you should go and buy some more for yourselves.” Are there really places open to buy lamp oil at midnight? Maybe there are some shopkeepers who live near their stores who wouldn’t mind being woken up from their night’s sleep to open their stores and sell oil to some foolish bridesmaids. I don’t know. Let’s just say that there is an all-night convenience store nearby. Off go the foolish bridesmaids to buy more oil for their lamps.

Meanwhile, the bridegroom arrives with his crew ready to take the bride to her new home and let the celebration begin. Now, there is no time for delay, no moment to wait for a group of foolish bridesmaids who didn’t bring enough oil for their lamps. The wedding festivities must proceed. So, the light of the wise bridesmaids will have to suffice. Ten was probably too many anyway. Five will be fine. And away they go to the bridegroom’s house to begin the party. And when the foolish bridesmaids discover that they have been left behind, they hurry after the rest of the bridal party hoping to catch up before they miss out on too much of the revelry. Unfortunately, when they arrive, they discover that the door is locked. They cannot get in. And, when they call out to the bridegroom seeking entrance, he refuses to grant them admission, claiming even that he does not know them. It’s a sad story. Like that of the Wedding Banquet last week, when the king discovered a guest who refused to wear his wedding robe and threw him out into “the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” there is no hope for the foolish bridesmaids. There is nothing they can do to remedy their foolishness. It is too late. The time has passed. All they can do is go home to their own houses and drown their sorrows in excess lamp oil. They will not need what they went to purchase. There will be no partying for them.

This is a troubling parable. There seems to be no grace in it. The bridegroom, who caused the problem by being late in the first place, shows no mercy on the foolish bridesmaids when they arrive late for the party. The wise bridesmaids, who brought extra oil with them for their lamps, have no pity for their unwise friends. Again, like so many of Jesus’ parables, it doesn’t seem fair. Haven’t they all, at one time or another, been guilty of poor planning? Haven’t they all found themselves, at some time, on the wrong side of a locked door? It happens. We know that. No one is perfect in all things. But, again, we need to remember that Jesus is giving us a picture of the kingdom of heaven. You may remember that way back in chapter seven of Matthew’s gospel, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does

the will of my Father in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord ...' Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers." Here is a picture of what that looks like. The foolish bridesmaids apparently have not been doing the will of the Father. And what is that? Jesus ends the parable by saying, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." It's important to remember that Matthew includes this story in a series of parables in chapters 24 and 25 having to do with the end of the age and the coming of the Son of Man. One of the themes in these parables is that the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour, and that no one knows the hour or the day, so that they must be ready at all times. The word here for "stay awake" means "to be vigilant." It means to "stay watchful, attentive, to avoid distraction and remain focused on the task at hand." The problem for the foolish bridesmaids is not their falling asleep – the wise bridesmaids feel asleep too – or even their poor planning, but that they were not there when the bridegroom arrived. They had abandoned their posts. They failed to remain vigilant. They lost their dedication to their mission. All they had to do is show up. But they missed it. And with it went their chance. Like the man without the wedding robe, they have excluded themselves; not this time by their willfulness, but through their inattention.

So, what does this mean for us? We'll talk about one more picture next week. That will help. But we need to hear this as a warning. Stay awake. Be attentive. Keep on watching. Don't lose focus. Do the will of the Father. As followers of Jesus, we have been given work to do. We are to wait and be ready to greet the Son of Man whenever he may arrive. We cannot let ourselves get so distracted that we miss that opportunity. The same confirmation class that I mentioned last week – the one that wanted to know if you could ever do something so terrible that God would no longer love you – was appalled one day, when I responded to a knock on our classroom door and responded to a young woman who was seeking diapers and formula for her baby. Because the church was on main street and highly visible, we received many such requests and had set up a system for providing such supplies through our local grocery store. They said, "What if she really doesn't need the help and is just taking advantage of us?" I said, "What if she is Jesus come back to be with us and we missed the opportunity to provide him with diapers and formula?" It's not easy. We could certainly miss out!

Amen.