



The In and the Out

Matthew 25:1-13

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Well, good morning. It's been quite a year, and it's been a doozy of a past week. As with any presidential election, put perhaps more so this year, there's a mixed bag of emotions and exhaustion we're all feeling. Though it seems Joe Biden has secured the electoral votes necessary to become the next president, to say this election has shown just how divided we are as a nation would be an understatement. I'm not sure anyone feels *really* good about this election, even if Biden was your choice of candidate.

It's always challenging to know what to say in the midst of an election season, or following a election's final decision. Inevitably, someone's going to be upset you didn't stand up for them, or their candidate. And, honestly, you've heard so much about politics during the week, (I have too,) in some ways, I don't want to talk politics at all. It would be a haven to ignore the reality of the world around us.

But ignoring the world around us is not the call of the faithful.

Our call as God's people is to respond to the world around us. To proclaim God's love in the world around us. To be the presence of Christ in the world around us. And that means showing up in what are often very political spaces – because the world around is very political – so that God's love might be made manifest in the world around us.

Today's gospel lectionary text comes from Matthew 25, and I thought it quite fitting for our current national situation. At first glance, there are 10 individuals waiting to get into the celebration banquet, and it seems that only half are going to be allowed in. Is there a more fitting text for the week of a national election that split its popular vote right down the middle?

Now hold on, don't get ahead of me. Before you start aligning yourself with one of the groups of bridesmaids, we've got some work to do with this text. Like many of Jesus' parables, we often try to align ourselves with those who are treated favorably in the text. And yet, Jesus' intent is usually to show we are the one on the outside, not the one on the inside.

This text is an especially challenging text. This parable is quite complicated. Contextually, it kind of fits the model of wedding celebrations that would take place in the Mediterranean region. There's a wedding to take place, and there are 10 young unwed women waiting for the groom to arrive so the wedding festivities can begin. Now, the English text calls them bridesmaids, but the Greek word is more literally translated as "virgins." The wedding event was not just a time to celebrate the marriage of the bride and groom, it was also a way to help young unwed

women find their own future husband. These young eligible women would escort the groom into the wedding feast to kick off the party.

Jesus is upfront in telling the parable, calling five of these young women wise, and five of them foolish. Professor Richard Swanson makes the argument that the wisdom being spoken of in this text is not book smarts. These are not women who have intellectual rigor. The Greek word used here is *phronimos*, which is more akin to street smarts, or prudence. “The word implies a well-honed ability to navigate in the real world, making the best of the quick decisions that end up guiding a surprisingly large chunk of a person’s life.”ⁱ In opposition, foolish is not a word to imply silly. Again, Swanson argues a better word would be “moron,” as the Greek word here is *morai*, the literal root of our English word “moron.” Though it seems harsh of Jesus to call these women morons, it’s not the worst he’s done. Don’t forget, Jesus once referred to a Canaanite woman as a dog.

So, we have 10 young unwed women, five of whom are prudent, five of whom are morons. They’re waiting for the groom to show up, so that they might escort him into the wedding banquet, but he is delayed. It’s every person’s worst nightmare on their wedding day, that their spouse-to-be decides not to show up to the altar.

And this is where the traditional interpretation of the text begins to break down. In a normal, quick, and perhaps shallow read, one hears that the five morons didn’t have enough oil to last until the groom showed up, because they didn’t expect him to be late. The five prudent women had enough oil, but were not going to share with the morons. So, the five morons went searching for more oil in the dark of the night. The groom appeared, escorted the five prudent women in, and refused to let the others in when they returned.

Jesus then offers this one line interpretation of the text, which says, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

So, what makes this text so complicated? Why does this normalized reading seem so wrong?

First, there’s a number of allegorical connections that just don’t mesh with the rest of the gospel text. Let’s take the bridegroom for starters. In its normalized reading, in the sense of this being an allegorical parable, many an interpreter try to say the bridegroom is the stand-in for Jesus. In that mindset, at the end of the parable, it’s *Jesus* who lets the wise – or prudent – women into the banquet, which would be a stand-in for heaven. And then it is Jesus who refuses entrance to the others once they show up with oil in their lamps.

Jesus does say in Matthew 7:21 that, “not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven.” So, there does seem to be a connection here to Jesus’ prior teachings. And yet, when we look at the other parables, and the greater witness of God’s love in Jesus Christ, this begins to break down quickly. What happened to Jesus being the shepherd who went to search for the lost sheep, leaving behind the 99 to find the 1? What happened to the old woman, who searched her entire house for a small lost coin, only to throw a banquet when the

lost coin was found? If Jesus is the allegorical stand-in for the good shepherd, or for the old woman, and he's willing to go searching for those who are lost, can he really be the same stand-in for the groom? Why would he not go searching for the five foolish women who were missing? ... Is Jesus not like the father in the story of the prodigal son? Does Jesus not welcome the one who was foolish and returned? This lost son was not refused entrance when he returned home, even after wasting his portion of the family inheritance. If Jesus was the bridegroom, would he not have lavishly welcomed those who had finally returned to the banquet?

Not only does this not make sense in regards to Jesus being the bridegroom, but it doesn't really make sense that the young women who are called wise, or prudent, should be seen as model disciples. Jesus' remark at the end of this parable indicates that the problem seen in this story was their failure to stay awake. He says in verse 13, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Go back up to verse 5. It reads, "As the bridegroom was delayed, *all of them* became drowsy and slept." It's hard to chastise just the five morons because they were sleeping, when all 10 of the women were sleeping at the same time. The problem can't be that they were sleeping, because then none of them could have been examples of faithful disciples. ... Or perhaps that Jesus' point, what if none of them were?

Pulling from the Biblical text, thinking yourself as being "wise" is not a suggested practice for faithful discipleship. In 1 Corinthians 3:18-20, we read, "Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. ... 'The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.'" How can we read this parable to be a praise for the women called wise, or prudent, when the Bible says such wisdom is foolishness in God's eyes?

Keep walking down that path ... why is such wisdom foolish? How could these women be seen as anything other than faithfully prepared?

Well, let's expand our vision – what else does the Bible offer that can help us? Luke 6:30 reads, "Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again." Wait, what? "Give to everyone who begs from you?" Yes, the prudent women had enough oil, but they refused to share any with those who had none. They were too scared that if they gave up any of their own oil, they wouldn't have enough for themselves. We see this kind of attitude chastised by Jesus *time and again*, throughout the Gospels. "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth." "Go and sell all you have, and give the proceeds to the poor." The Biblical text is never favorable to those who refuse to share with others when those others have need. Are these five prudent women the lone exception in the whole of the Biblical story?

And centering here on Matthew's gospel, this parable – the parable of the bridesmaids – is one of three parables Jesus tells in consecutive order. Backing up to Matthew 24, beginning in verse 45, Jesus tells the parable of the faithful or the unfaithful slave. He then tells the parable of the

bridesmaids. He then tells the parable of the talents. In common Jesus fashion, he doesn't expand upon those parables when telling them. He doesn't give a lot of individual detail as to the point, or the moral of each of the three stories. He just tells the parable.

And then, immediately following those three parables, we come to Matthew 25, verse 31. Jesus is *STILL SPEAKING*. He's hardly had time to catch his breath. This is not a separate story – it is a culmination of the parables. Jesus is giving his clarification. And what does he say in 31-46? He says “what you have done to the least of these, you have done to me.” He praises those who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and welcomed the stranger. He chastises those who have failed to give drink to the thirsty, or care for the sick.

You can't read the parable of the bridesmaids, and then read the judgement of the nations that follows it, and think that Jesus was ok with the prudent bridesmaids failing to share their excess oil! Sure, that's wisdom from a worldly perspective, but it doesn't fit the defining characteristics of the kingdom of God.

We may want to be the wise bridesmaids, and honestly, perhaps we often are. We think we're in the right place, because we have what we need to enter the banquet feast. And we think that Jesus is rewarding our behavior, by shutting out those who are running behind.

In that way, we can also say, this parable is chastising the five morons for not having enough oil. That's what we like to say, that we're in, and they're out, because they have failed to be prepared. We've done our personal part, but they haven't, so we're good, and they're not.

But what if having enough oil isn't the moron's problem. Perhaps their foolishness is not in having too little oil. Perhaps their foolishness is in thinking that they had to go find more. Jesus says in Matthew 5, that “whoever follows Jesus will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Revelation 22 says, “we will not need the light of lamps, for the Lord God will give them light.” What if their foolishness is in thinking that the light of God would not be sufficient for them? If it's a parable of the eschaton, Revelation certainly has something to offer. Why are they worried that God won't usher them in unless they go buy more – they go replenish their own supply, instead of trusting that God will take care of them?

This parable is challenging at best. The normalized reading is so shallow. And I read this text, in Jesus' critique to stay awake, I can't help but wonder, what if we've got it *all* wrong? They all slept, is Jesus criticizing them all?

What if the story isn't about Jesus as the groom, but about abusive earthly kings who think it's ok to exclude those who are running behind? What if this story isn't about praising the five wise bridesmaids for having enough any more than it is about shaming the five foolish ones for going to look for more? What if Jesus' argument is that they're all wrong? That the bridegroom is wrong, that the five wise women are wrong, and that the five foolish women are wrong.

What if the parable isn't about having too little oil, but about understanding that it's not how much oil we have that matters? What if the parable isn't about having sufficient oil, but about understanding that it's how we share our resources that matters? What if Jesus, when saying, 'keep awake therefore,' is not talking about falling asleep or running out of oil, but is saying that, had all 10 worked as one – had they not lost sight of the goal of all celebrating together – they would have all entered together? And that, when we operate from a mindset of scarcity, holding on to what we have in the here and now, while we may enjoy the worldly banquet, if we fail to see Christ in the other, the worldly banquet may be our only feast. And that, when we operate from a mentality of worthlessness, thinking we are not good enough, we will also miss out on the glory of the eternal banquet.

See, when only 50% make it in, it's not a positive sign for any of us. We cannot rejoice in the fullness of God's eternal glory, in such a divided creation. To think that God would be ok with 50% margins, is to fail to understand the desire and the will of God for humanity. For God did not send Jesus to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

So look, church, we've got to be more honest. We've got to acknowledge that at times, we've been the foolish ones – the morons – who have believed that we didn't have enough. We've listened to the voice of others tell us to go on, because there wasn't a space for us. ... And at times, we've been the wise ones, who thought we were good because we had it all figured out. We thought, as long as we have what we need, we'll be alright. We told the others to go on, that they were on their own. And we were wrong. Our selfishness props us up in worldly ways to our own eternal detriment. ... And at times, we've been the groom. We've shown up late, commanded the celebration, and then refused others whose lack of preparation was due to our own tardiness.

Jesus says, 'keep awake,' pay attention, look here – for in each of my created, there is the image of the Creator. And until we can enter in the joy of God's creation in unity, as one, we have more work to do. God's love is not reserved for just 50%, God declares my love is to be made known to all. May we be part of *that* work. For God's glory. Amen.

ⁱ Richard Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007.