



UNCHAINED: You Are Enough

Matthew 25:1-13

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

January 15, 2017

In this season of Epiphany, we are considering what it means to break free from the chains of past disappointments and harbored guilt. Each week we will be looking at common chains that people allow to hold them down, the cumulative result of years past piling up on us, which ends up preventing us from experiencing the freedom God intends for us to experience in our walk of faithful discipleship. As we named last week, one of the first steps in breaking our chains to experience freedom in forgiveness is naming the chains that lock us down. Secondly, having named the chains, we seek the forgiveness of God's love to help break the chains, enabling us to live as the creator intended when we first received the breath of the Spirit in our lives.

Today we glean our call from God to break from the chains of guilt from the parable of the bridesmaids.

The story of the bridesmaids is sometimes a difficult one for us to understand, just like last week's scripture with Jesus dining at the Pharisee's house, because we try to read the story as if it were set in our 21st century understanding. The custom of the bridesmaids ushering in the bridegroom into the feast is foreign to us, uncommon in our modern day wedding traditions.

If you were to try and equate the story to our modern day practices, I want you to imagine you're sitting at the reception waiting for the wedding party to enter. At many of wedding I've attended, including my own, the practice is for the DJ to start calling out the names of the wedding party, couple by couple, and to have the couples all enter in reverse order, starting with the parents of the couple, groomsmen paired up with bridesmaids, the best man and maid of honor enter last, just before the bride and groom themselves. It's a chance for the wedding party to be introduced to the wedding guests; it's a chance to identify the best friends, brothers, sisters, and other key persons in the lives of both the bride and groom.

Now, imagine that moment – that time when the DJ is calling out the names of the wedding party – and they come waltzing in to the reception venue. Only, the wedding party is consisting only of the groom and the bridesmaids – young, unwed, very eligible women. The introduction of the bridesmaids is not just a way to let the gathered crowd know who they are, it's to call attention to the women so that all the unmarried and looking men in the room may get a good glimpse of the eligible and unwed women attending. This is the 1st century practice.

The women – knowing they will be put on display – knowing this is a chance for them to find love – are prepared to enter the room, dressed to the nines, made up, and scented with sweet smells of perfume. The women are not just waiting for the bridegroom to return so they can

escort *him* into the feast, the women are anxiously awaiting his return so he can escort *them* into the feast.

Knowing it will be a late night reception, and perhaps knowing they'll be waiting outside for the bridegroom, the women all bring lamps to keep watch for his return.

The scripture fills us in that there are ten women who will be escorted in by the bridegroom. All ten of them bring lamps that are filled with oil. They are all prepared for the expected and normal time of waiting. Five of the women bring an extra flask of oil, and Jesus, in telling the parable, calls these women wise. The five who did not bring the extra flask of oil are labeled by Jesus as foolish.

As the story goes, the bridegroom is delayed in his return. We don't know why he's late; perhaps he gets cold feet and is second guessing the decision and the vows he has made? Perhaps he doesn't know how to dance and is terrified about being put on display at the reception? Or, perhaps his best man had taken him out for a pre-dinner drink to celebrate the wedding. The parable doesn't give any insight into his delay, just saying his return is late – very late. In fact, he does not return to the feast until midnight.

The bridegroom has delayed for so long that the bridesmaids, ready as they were with their lamps earlier in the night, have all fallen asleep. The oil that had been in their lamps has all but burned out. They scurry as they awake, probably trying to freshen themselves up while they work on trimming their lamps, so they can finally enjoy their moment as an escort of the groom. But as they are trimming their lamps, the five women who didn't bring an extra flask of oil start to fear – they have no oil to add to their quickly extinguishing lamps. And so, the five with no more oil say to the five with extra oil, "Give us some of your oil, for ours are going out." The five with the extra flask respond, "No! If we give you some of ours, we won't have enough for ourselves. You had better go and buy some more for yourself."

Before we complete the parable, this moment is worth some added attention. In the parable, Jesus doesn't seem to address the women who had the extra flask. He never seems to call attention to the fact that they are so selfish, that they are unwilling to share their oil with the others. And, while the English text translates Jesus' parable as saying these women were *wise* for their attention to detail in the bringing the extra oil, perhaps we should revisit what constitutes as wisdom. The Greek word used in this parable to describe the women who brought the extra oil, the word we often see translated as the word *wise*, is the word φρόνιμος (*phronimos*). A more literal translation to English of the Greek word *phronimos* would be *prudent*. The women who brought the extra oil were prudent women – they showed extra care and thought for the future of the night.

What's wrong with the word *wise* you may ask? Sure. It seems like an act of wisdom to think through the scenario and wonder, 'Self, what if things don't go as planned? Perhaps I should take extra oil.' But wisdom is defined as, "the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment."¹ If the women were really wise, if five wise women were all in the same place

at the same time, would they not have suggested that everyone extinguish their lamps once it became known the bridegroom would be delayed? Would they not have thought through the need to conserve oil? Would they not have suggested to the foolish bridesmaids to go and fetch more oil long before the midnight return of the groom?

Wise or prudent? You can probably take your pick and make an argument for either. Perhaps more fitting altogether would be snobs, jerks, conceited, or perhaps better yet, self-centered. The women who had enough oil aren't willing to share the extra they have, because they want to ensure they stand out. So, when the foolish girls are scrambling for oil, the prudent ones take advantage and send them off to the city at the dark hour of midnight, in hopes of finding an oil distributor who might not be outraged to have been woken up for the purpose of securing some extra oil.

Like those who hold the upper hand even in society today, instead of extending a helping hand, the prudent ones lord over the unprepared, sending them off into the dark of the night, with barely a lamp lit, to fend for themselves. Imitating the detrimental acts of a 'win at any cost society,' the women turn on each other, hoping to take advantage of the other's mistakes. After all, having only five eligible women offers much better odds at getting the prized bachelor than with the full ten.

Such a cut-throat society, one that places unhealthy expectations on each of us, one that expects us to be over prepared for even the most unexpected of circumstances, is not only corrupt, it's ungodly. In such a society, "mistakes [aren't treated as] lessons to learn from, but [instead as] public humiliations, which serve only to knock our confidence and thwart our passions."ⁱⁱ

But so the parable goes. The women who had enough, instead of sharing, instead of caring for the others, they lashed out, refusing to offer of their abundance, and sent the foolish women packing into the night. And when the bridegroom made it to the reception site, the foolish were no where to be seen. Convinced of their shortcomings, they foolish had gone in search of something more, and upon their return, they were left out of the party.

It's like the classic story of Rudy, only if Rudy never actually played in the final game. It's like the story of Remember the Titans, only if they never pulled together to win a game. Like the Lord of Rings, only Frodo never destroyed the ring. It's the story of a people who were bullied and never included, always being told they weren't quite good enough, always having to overcome personal doubt due to the harassment of others, and always missing the celebration while sulking in their defeat.

But, folks, while this text is sometimes treated in such a way; while this parable is often used to encourage the strong and lay guilt on the weak; while this wedding feast is often used to call our attention to the disparity between the 'well-prepared' and the 'ill-prepared,' perhaps we shouldn't be so quick as to assume this text is about making sure we are good enough, or that we have enough. Perhaps this text is not about being prudent or even being wise.

Let's focus in on verse 13. Jesus has finished telling the parable. Jesus has concluded the story-telling and is now offering one line of clarification. It's no hidden secret that the disciples and the Pharisees had trouble understanding the parables Jesus told. They often were left speechless, left in state of conviction or confusion (often a mixture of both). So Jesus offers this one line to help shape their understanding of the parable.

He says, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Keep awake. The Greek word here that Jesus speaks is *γρηγορέω (gregoreo)*, which more literally means, *stay alert*.

Jesus, in his explanation of the parable, doesn't even draw attention to the fact that some had less oil and some had more. He doesn't seem to care about who had lit lamps when the bridegroom returned.

When you consider the parable, all ten women showed up with lit lamps, and all ten women fell asleep. But Jesus' teaching says that what made the difference, what allowed five to enter the feast and five to be left out, had to do with alertness.

I've said this before, and I reemphasize here, words are important. Did you know that the word *alert* is not just about being attentive, it's about being mindfully attentive to dangerous circumstances? To be alert is to be, 'in the state of being watchful for possible danger.' To alert someone is, 'to warn (them) of a danger, threat, or problem.'

Jesus, in summarizing the parable, is calling us to be in a state of alertness – we need to be prepared to see the dangers that may lie around us.

We often hear this parable as calling the five women foolish because they weren't prudent enough to bring extra oil. We think them foolish because they weren't quite prepared well enough. We allow ourselves to give into the normative reading that says they were foolish because they just didn't have what they needed.

Jesus doesn't seem to name that narrative as foundational. Jesus doesn't say they were foolish because they didn't have enough. Of course they had enough. The bridegroom was already there – he was visible in the distance. He was nearly upon them. Perhaps they were foolish, not because they had too little, but because they were too busy comparing their lamps to the lamps of the others. They were foolish because they let someone else tell them they didn't have enough. Perhaps they were foolish because they let someone else convince them they needed to go get more. They were foolish because the bridegroom was returning to escort them into the feast, and they weren't alert enough to the dangers that were calling them to doubt themselves. They were foolish because they were awake, ready, and present – and they gave in to the voice of someone else, who convinced them they weren't good enough.

Like Adam and Eve in the garden, the bridesmaids had everything they needed, and they gave into the voice of evil which convinced them they needed more.

Friends, here this, you are beautifully and wonderfully made in the image of God. You are good enough just as you are. You have everything you need, gifted to you by the gracious love of God. To be part of the feast, to be part of the celebration, to join in the eternal joy of the presence of our Bridegroom, you do not need to be perfect as our society seeks to define perfect, you just need to know who it is that created you perfectly. I invite you today to break free from the chains of our society that would call you to go out and be more, do more, have more; be alert to any who says you aren't good enough. For truly, as we sit here in the presence of God, God speaks into each of your lives and says, *YOU ARE ENOUGH*. Rejoice, and celebrate at the feast of the Lord. Amen.

ⁱ "Wisdom." Google.com. Retrieved, January 12, 2017.

ⁱⁱ James Dwyer. "Stop Trying to be Perfect." Relevantmagazine.com. Retrieved, January 9, 2017.