

Fueling Up in the Community of Faith
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Matthew 25:1-13

How many times has this happened to you: Your suitcase is packed, you're all ready to go off on a new adventure. Maybe it's a business trip, or perhaps you are going on vacation (and wouldn't we all want to go somewhere warm soon?) You run down the list of necessary items (twice!): a couple of changes of clothes, a warm jacket for chilly nights, a swimsuit.

You think you have everything you need, but as soon as you get there you realize you left something important behind. It's a small thing, but vital and difficult to replace: a belt, a black pair of socks, a tube of toothpaste or copies of that sales presentation you were supposed to make at the home office.

Accommodations have been made for the forgetful traveler. Hotels have small tubes of toothpaste and disposable shavers for their customers, or there is usually a Target or Wal-Mart nearby. Thankfully our forgotten presentation materials can now be scanned and emailed, or delivered overnight. Indeed, the young bridesmaids were not as fortunate as we are.

This story leaves me with a lot of questions... I wonder what would have happened to those foolish bridesmaids had they simply waited, instead of running out into the darkness of the night for a little extra fuel?

Surely the bridal couple would have welcomed their friends into the light of the banquet, happy just to see them, even if their lamps had sputtered dark.

And what are we to do with those wise ones who couldn't spare an ounce of oil? We teach our children - sharing is caring. What selfish behavior... "No", they say, "we cannot share with you because we *might* not have enough for *ourselves*. We're not sure, but just to be safe, we're not sharing what we have".

What they seem to have in common is both the wise and the foolish operate on scarcity and fear. Neither trusts that the bridegroom will embrace all,

regardless of whether they walk in light or walk in darkness. Neither remembers the words of the Psalmist's words of assurance that to God night and day are the same and the night is as bright as the noonday sun.

So the wise break up the bridal party and send the foolish away to beg and bang on doors of friends, relatives, and shopkeepers in search for oil.

By the time they get back, they are ostracized, left out the cold and dark of night. Perhaps the groom thought they had simply given up and gone home. But nothing could have been further from the truth. They wanted to please the groom so much they have gone to amazing lengths to scrounge up oil while the rest of the town slept and the wedding party feasted.

What are we to do with this bridegroom, this apparent Christ-figure, who acts so uncharitably, who tells the industrious-yet-still-foolish bridesmaids to go away? Is this the same Jesus, the shepherd who leaves the 99 to search for the lost one, the woman who leaves no stone unturned in search of a lost coin?

According to bridal customs during the first century, the groom would have arrived to the wedding celebration *with* the bride. The bridesmaids would have been her friends and would be awaiting her arrival at the groom's side. Indeed, many scholars agree that the original parable likely included the bride and the bridegroom arriving late together.

If the bridegroom is already with his bride when he arrives, then how can this parable be interpreted as the return of Christ for his bride? It can't.

The Gospel of Matthew was written shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, at a time when religious institutional leaders were clamping down on rebellious and heretical strands of Judaism, including followers of "the Way". Leaders drew lines in the sand of who was in and who was out.

So perhaps this story is less about the return of Christ and more about those who literally shut the doors on the Jesus movement.

When Jesus gets to the end of his kingdom of heaven series (Bridesmaids, Talents, Sheep & Goats), he tells us who were the truly foolish and who were the truly wise. Those who fed the poor, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and imprisoned have a special place in the kingdom.

If they hoarded what they had, then they have already enjoyed their reward. The wise on earth had their wedding feast on earth. It was comforting, but also fleeting and temporary.

The time for building reserves, as both the wise bridesmaids (and those considering retirement) can run out suddenly and unexpectedly. Dark times come into every life. It's in the darkness that we most need the assurance of the abundant promises of God, peace that passes understanding, and a hope that can sustain us through disappointments and failures, devastating loss and grief--closed doors of all kinds.

We will need hope urgently when our child is sick or our parent is helpless. We will need peace urgently when we realize there may not be enough money to pay the bills at the end of the month. We will need love urgently when we wonder whether a relationship will last. We will need joy urgently when the pain of loss and grief seems to crush us.

Dark times come to every generation. Today's young adults are as worried about their future as are we in older generations. No matter the results of the next election, the context into which young people find themselves is characterized by the unrest of terrorist attacks, unrelenting war, economic instability, environmental destruction and violence of all kinds.

So they turn to dystopian novels, video games and stories about zombies to help them imagine worst case scenarios so that they might begin to deal with the crises that lie ahead, hoping reality will not be as horrifying as what they imagine.

Polls tell us that young adults trend toward having no religious affiliation, self-identifying as "spiritual but not religious". But deeply spiritual experiences are hard to find among the Tweets, Snap Chats, and Instagrams that deliver fleeting, short-term returns and an insatiable appetite for more.

Maybe there is another way to look at it... I keep thinking about those foolish bridesmaids and wondering if their biggest mistake was leaving the party. While it is true that we each have to seek our own spiritual sustenance, the irony is that we often discover what we need when we are in community with others, seeking spiritual fuel together.

Given everything else Jesus tells us about community, he cannot be satisfied with such a fractured group as appears in this parable. And neither should we ignore our discomfort with its brokenness.

Thank God we have the blessing of being ten bridesmaids together, each of us seeking deeply satisfying spiritual sustenance, together receiving the nurture of a spirit-filling community of faith.

Beside one another, prayer rises up without ceasing, sometimes in sighs too deep for words.

Beside one another, we serve a world in need and witness God's constant work of resurrection and transformation.

Beside one another, we sing the songs of faith as they imprint upon us deeply both grace and joy.

Beside one another is where the love of God continues to appear in surprising and unexpected ways.

As it turns out, I've probably been each of this parable's characters. You probably have been too. I've been the foolish one whose lamp has run out. I've been the wise one who feared sharing and losing what I had. I've been the bridegroom who refused to let people in. And maybe, in the end, that's all this parable does. Maybe that's what all good short stories do. They allow us to find ourselves, warts and all.

So, if you find yourself feeling like the foolish bridesmaids, remember to wait in the darkness. Don't run from it. The darkness is a holy place and God will meet you there.

And if you find yourself feeling like the wise bridesmaids, remember to share what you have, even when it scares you. Don't trade temporary comfort for lasting community. The chance to give of yourself is a holy place and God will meet you there.

And if you find yourself feeling like the bridegroom, remember to open wide the door to the banquet feast. Don't let hurt feelings and fear insulate you from others. Welcoming those who have made mistakes and who walk in darkness is a holy place. God will meet you there. Amen.