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Lesson: Matthew 25:1-13

¹“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” ⁹But the wise replied, “No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.” ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open to us.” ¹²But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

When a gospel passage begins with Jesus saying the phrase, “The kingdom of heaven will be like this,” I prepare myself to hear an inspiring parable. Give us something that opens our eyes and stirs our hearts. May something in this parable make me passionate about our call to follow our Lord. But on its face, this parable is anything but that. Ten bridesmaids wait for the bridegroom. Five of them have oil in their lamps, and five don’t. When the groom finally approaches, the five without oil

hurriedly try to find it. By the time they obtain it, the door to the party has been shut. The parable ends with, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day or the hour.” On its face, this is a let-down. This parable is not an inspiring image of the kingdom of heaven, at least at first glance. So we dig into it to find some good news.

First of all, let’s remember that it is a parable, so we are supposed to gain insights from it while not interpreting it too literally. The story indicates that the bridesmaids are all a part of the same cohort. They are all waiting for the bridegroom, but there is a delay. When he finally comes, some of the bridesmaids are without oil for their lamps. Of course, the image of someone carrying a lamp is a throwback to something Jesus said earlier in Matthew’s gospel, when he was delivering the Sermon on the Mount. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Also, our parable today ends with the unprepared bridesmaids saying, “Lord, Lord, open to us!” This is a throwback to something else Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount; “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.”

Often when we interpret this parable we assign traits to the separate groups of bridesmaids. We assign qualities to the so-called foolish ones and the so-called wise ones. The takeaway is then “have these good qualities and don’t have these bad qualities.” We judge the bridesmaids because judging others is what we tend to do. Such interpretations of this parable ultimately just make this story a moralism: “do good, or else.” There isn’t much of God’s good news in moralisms, plus Jesus began the parable by saying the “the kingdom of God is like.” So the parable’s takeaway should be more about that kingdom than about our judgments on others. To get to

that better interpretation, I think we need to follow the clues that Jesus left for us. Namely the clues that are those throwbacks to his Sermon on the Mount.

At the core of that sermon is the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit; those who mourn; the meek; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; the merciful; the pure in heart; the peacemakers; those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; and those who are reviled and persecuted on account of Jesus. That list flies in the face of what conventional wisdom says are signs of blessing. Yet the Christian faith largely says that God's wisdom flies in the face of conventional wisdom. The beatitudes invite us into a life that is not centered on our own works. It is not even centered on our own faith. Rather, the beatitudes invite us into a life that is centered on the cross and the ways that God is glorified through our humble lives. Lives that are defined by the cross. Lives that make it clear that God is the main actor and the source of our lives.

When our lives are defined by the cross, as it is described in the beatitudes, it recognizes God's presence in our suffering. If we keep that idea in mind as we read today's parable, it opens up the parable to mean something more than an initial reading might reveal. An initial reading can lead us to think that the point is about a future return of Jesus. That is largely due to the fact that this parable uses some elements of the apocalyptic writing style that was popular in Jesus' day, but often completely misread in our own day. Reading this parable through the lens of the beatitudes reveals something more to us. The wise bridesmaids who recognize the bridegroom are those who recognize the presence of God in their own misfortune and even their own poverty. The foolish bridesmaids are unable to recognize Christ in such things. When Christ impores us to keep awake because we don't know the day or

the hour, try to understand it as an appeal to look at the poverty, illness, persecution, and weakness in our own lives and communities, and see God present right there. When the cross shapes our lives to see God in such things, then we are wise and we will see the presence of the bridegroom. If the cross does not shape our lives -- if we see blessing only in things that carry prestige and power -- then we run the risk of being caught unawares of the bridegroom's presence.

There are many things that clamor to define and shape our lives. It can be a certain image we seek to project to others, it can be the categories that we tend to use to differentiate people. We all know that this past week has brought to a head some passionate differences between Americans. Although these differences are real, know that as Christians we are called to find our ultimate identity in the cross, not in what we do, not in what we aspire to be, and not in our tribal viewpoints. God is present in the broken, weak, and even shameful parts of our lives. God does that, and that act of God ultimately defines who we are as Christians.

The good news of this parable is that the door is still open to the wedding banquet. No one has been cut off from it. What we have is an invitation to allow the cross of Christ to define our lives. Through it we can witness God at work in weakness, rather than going about our lives missing out on how God is acting. God is present. Don't grow weary. Keep awake, trusting in God's activity in your weakness.

Thanks be to God. Amen.