

1

While reading the Bible, have you ever scratched your head with puzzlement or wanted to argue with it? After last week's parable about the king having a wedding banquet for his son, someone asked me, "If the parable portrays what the kingdom of heaven is like, and the king represents God, why does the king throw a guest out of the party after inviting the guest? I can't imagine God throwing someone out of heaven." Although we have to be careful to not take a parable too literally, the person posed a good question—one that would make a great debate or discussion as we strive to better understand the imagery of the kingdom of heaven that fills the parables of Jesus, for God would not toss someone out of the Kingdom of Heaven.

This week we have another parable about the kingdom of heaven—one that leaves me once again with unanswered questions. The parable begins by stating "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like..." signaling that this story is a word picture, telling us about something other than just a wedding and the guests. Many traditional

interpretations go somewhat like this: *if you don't take time to prepare for Jesus' return, he won't know you when he shows up.* I'm troubled by that interpretation, for if the bridesmaids represent us and the bridegroom is Jesus, don't you think it's a bit harsh to ignore us just because we are unprepared and ran out of oil? Most of us go about life the best we can. We juggle many responsibilities: raising children, going to work, cleaning the house, cooking meals, attending church, managing our health, paying bills, and trying to have some fun. We may find ourselves more often like the five bridesmaids who forgot the extra oil. Have you ever had a day when you feel as though your energy has run low—or the oil in your lamp has run out? What happens if Jesus shows up on one of those days? Will he ignore us because we're having a bad day and forgot the extra oil? That doesn't sound like the Jesus I know, one who experienced the struggles of humanity and offered God's hope even on the worst of days.

In reflecting on this story, one writer suggested that:

2

The image of the bridegroom shunning the unprepared bridesmaids is disturbing. And it truly is disturbing when we leave ourselves in a position to miss great moments of creative transformation in partnership with God in our lives. Some of those missed moments are painful for us; some are painful for others; and all are painful for God who always only wants the best for each of us.¹

You've probably experienced one of those painful missed moments, a time when you were too busy to do everything you wanted to do. It's not possible to be everywhere at the same time, which leads to missed events or forgotten schedules, or possibly missed words, as was the case with one man

whose wife suddenly died. They had been married for more than forty years. Two days after her funeral, he stood at her gravesite and stared at the ground. Blinking back the tears, he said to a friend, "She was the light of my life. She brought such joy to our home. She did everything for me. She was the perfect wife and companion. I loved her so much, and once I almost told her!"²

How many times do we miss the opportunity to tell someone how much we love him or her? Our spouse, parents, children, friends. It's painful to miss those moments to say loving words.

When Jesus spoke about the young women bringing their lamps, he used the Greek word *lampas*, which sounds a bit like our word *lamp*, but which carries a much broader meaning than a light sitting on our living room table. The word means "to shine, to be bright." That could apply to more than just a lamp, but to our lives. Jesus invites us to the party—to the kingdom of heaven—to shine our lights, to be bright, to reflect God's love. When we miss the opportunity, life may seem a bit dull, like the flickering light of an oil lamp nearing the end of its oil.

Jesus' parable underscores the importance of being ready to join the party, being prepared to share of light and reflect God's light. It's another of those basic things we learned in childhood: be prepared. But rather than hearing just my reminder, let's travel once again to our imaginary broadcast.

3

Doug (*using handheld mic*): This is Pastor Doug with WPBA, “Parables Brought Alive.” This week I’m live again on location. Two weeks ago, we were on location in a vineyard interviewing workers who all received the same pay but worked different amounts of time. We discovered that in the kingdom of heaven everyone gets the same reward. Last week we interviewed someone who received an invitation to a party when the original guests didn’t show up—a reminder that everyone is welcome into God’s place. This time we’re outside the doors where ten bridesmaids have gathered waiting for a bridegroom to come through that door. Let’s speak with one of them. Excuse me, can you tell me why you’re here?

Bridesmaid: My friends and I were part of the wedding party, and now we are waiting for the bridegroom to arrive so we can go to the wedding banquet.

Doug: How exciting. How long have you been waiting?

Bridesmaid: It’s been longer than we anticipated, for the bridegroom seems to have been delayed.

Many of us fell asleep while waiting, but someone indicated he’s almost here.

Doug: I see you all have matching oil lamps. What is their significance?

Bridesmaid: We are the torchbearers³, the ones to lead the procession to the wedding banquet carrying our lamps. Our lamps have a limited amount of oil in them, and since the bridegroom has been delayed, I’m concerned...Oh dear...I’ll be right back. (*exits to side.*)

Doug: There seems to be a problem. Five of the women have gathered around the other five, and there seems to be quite a heated discussion. Let’s see if we can find out what’s going on. Excuse me, but what seems to be the problem?

Bridesmaid: We’ve been waiting so long that some of our lamps have run out of oil. Some of the other women brought extra oil, so we asked to borrow their oil, but they refused, for then they

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wouldn't have enough to lead the processional to the wedding banquet. I'll be right back.

Doug: Where are you going?

Bridesmaid (*says as exiting*): To the store to get more oil.

Doug: It appears that five of the women are leaving together to head to the store for more oil for their lamps...Wait...I've just received an update. I think the bridegroom is arriving. Yes, there he is, and the procession to the banquet has begun. Only five of the ten women are leading the parade, for five were unprepared and did

not bring along extra oil for their lamps. I wonder what will happen when they come back and find everyone gone? What will happen when they arrive late to the banquet? I've been told that latecomers often don't get admitted, due to security issues and preventing admittance to those who try to crash the party. Those unprepared torchbearers may not get through the doors when they arrive late, but I guess that's a reminder to always be prepared.

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¹ David Grant Smith, <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/years/2014-11-09/proper-27>
² Adapted from *Lord, Give Me Patience!* by James W. Moore and Bob J. Moore, 101.
³ Ben Witherington, "Women in the Ministry of Jesus," Cambridge University, 1984, p. 43.