

November 9, 2014  
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
Matthew 25:1-13

Always a Bridesmaid...

I admit that whenever the parables from Matthew's gospel come up, I am really reluctant to preach from them. These stories are full of warning and judgment. If you are not faithful, if you are not committed, if you are not ready for Jesus at all times, then you will be discovered and Jesus will chuck you out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. These are not happy or easy parables. They are tense and fearful parables. And that's because of they come from a very tense and fearful part of Matthew's gospel. The end part, chapters 24 & 25. It is called the Little Apocalypse, if that tells you anything. In these chapters, Jesus talks a lot about death and judgment and the end times. And little wonder. He is facing his own death and his disciples will have to go on without him. It is a foretaste of the trouble that is to come. Jesus is trying to warn them. And us. That it will be difficult. But he expects us to still be his disciples until he returns. We will need to be like wise bridesmaids, with enough oil to keep our lamps burning until the bridegroom appears.

Be prepared. Be ready for what will be required of you. Being a disciple is not a casual thing, Jesus says. You must be equipped. You must be intentional. Because Jesus says, it will matter in the end. At the end of my ministry, when I am gone, you will need to have the courage to keep going. In the end, when times are evil and the world has grown dark, I'll need you to be strong. In the end, when I return, I want to find that my disciples are still being my disciples. Be ready. Be vigilant, he tells them. Be about my Father's business and no matter what time it is, be faithfully prepared. Or else. Or else there you will be, with no oil and a dark lamp. Or else there you'll be, with nothing to show your Savior. Or else there you will be, shut out of the wedding party, unknown to the Lord, missing the very thing you said you were waiting for.

These are not happy easy words. They are not words from a tame and gentle Savior. His gospel is not always gentle or tame. The 'or else' message here is not one which I particularly like. But I must hear it. And I must remember that this message is for me as much as it is for the early church. These parables were written for Matthew's community around the year 85 AD. And his community expected that Jesus would return

very quickly after his death. But decades passed. The first generation of Christians began to die. And Jesus had not come back. It became difficult to be in that high alert mode of watching for Jesus all the time. And it created a lot of tension in Matthew's community. We can tell because Matthew's gospel is the only gospel with these parables of a harsh judgment for unprepared disciples. They must have really been struggling. They were struggling with how Mr. So and so had quit coming and Ms. Such and Such couldn't commit the time any more. And the Whatsits family, well, you couldn't rely on them for anything. And the only consolation was that there would be a day when their faithfulness mattered. And God would sort it out. It would matter that you had been obedient and committed and ready with that lamp trimmed and burning for Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

So in this parable, we hear the strain of the early church. It's a word for them, but it is also a word for us. After all, we are still disciples of Jesus. We are still waiting for Jesus. We are still the bridesmaids awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom. And we are still to have enough oil, so our

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Skinner, <http://www.odysseynetworks.org/on-scripture-the-bible/since-wait-wed-better-get-work-matthew-251-13/>

lamps will be burning when he comes. Though the wait is long and difficult. We want to be ready. For the joy of his arrival. For the joy of his kingdom come. For the joy of pleasing Jesus, when he finds us at our post.

Joy. Ultimately that's what this parable is about. We might miss it in all the judgment. Jesus' return is compared to something joyful, a wedding.

Not something violent or fearful. Not an alien invasion. Or a date before the judge. Or a final exam in school. It's a party. And we are the

bridesmaids announcing that the celebration is about to begin. What a way to think about church. As a group of people gathered, waiting in

delicious anticipation for the world's most amazing party. Joyful and excited for what God is about to do. Ready for a wedding banquet.

Prepared for eternity in our Father's house. Practiced with every moment at the Communion Table, because it is a foretaste of the feast to come.

Can you imagine church like that?

Bridesmaids live in anticipation. That's what they do. A bridesmaid's life is about the wedding; it's in the job title. It's their job to celebrate

with the bride and groom. And to anticipate the party. And the great live

music. And that there will be a big dance floor. And such great food. Like prosciutto wrapped melon and bacon wrapped everything. And an amazing cake with that really great raspberry filling. And it'll be so much fun that you won't want to go home. But the party hasn't started yet. Because not everyone is here. It's almost time, but not yet. The bridegroom hasn't come with the bride. And that's who they are waiting for. That's who we are waiting for. It's the reason we have this party to begin with. It's not for us. It's not for ourselves. It's for the bridegroom, who has come to claim this world that he loves. And how he has gone to hell and back to do it. And the bridesmaids are there to welcome him. It's the bridesmaids' job to be there. To stand with a light in the darkness, a beacon of hope, proclaiming that God's party is about to start.

Bridesmaids are to be waiting faithfully. Or else they aren't doing their job. They are to be ready. With lamps lit. With reserves to keep the lamp lit. With faith and hope when the night grows long. We are the bridesmaids. But we have been waiting for a very long time. And we are weary from the world. And our spirits are tired. And maybe we doze off,

just like the bridesmaids because we are waiting and waiting for Jesus.

But being tired isn't the issue. Falling asleep isn't a problem. All of the bridesmaids in our parable do it. All of them, wise and foolish, they all fall asleep. I guess it's bound to happen to all of us. Because we need rest. We need Sabbath. And there is grace for that.

But when the time comes, when the shout goes up, we need to be ready. Because if you are a bridesmaid, then your lamp needs to be lit when the bridegroom comes. If you are a bridesmaid, then you have to be ready and plan ahead and bring enough oil. The gospel writer Matthew is telling his little Christian community and us that Jesus doesn't want us to run out of gas. He doesn't want us to get to the end and run out of fuel. He needs us to put in the effort to be prepared. Because it's not enough to just to show up. It's not enough to just bring your lamp. It's not enough to think of this as a short-term commitment. You are a bridesmaid of Christ. Be ready. Or else your light will go out. Be ready or else you won't be there to meet the bridegroom. Be ready or else you will miss the party. Be ready or else you won't be able to do your bridesmaid best.

Jesus expects us to have our lamps lit. That's our job. We are to be those wise bridesmaids, prepared to hold the light in the darkness. To illuminate the world around us. And we do it by how we live. We hold the light by being hospitable and kind. We are to the light by welcoming strangers and loving enemies. We hold the light by feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and visiting the prisoners and comforting those who mourn; By showing people that they are beloved and that they matter. By witnessing to the abundant life, the life beyond the life that God has for us. The life we long for even as death nips at our heels. We hold the light. We live in hope, says Paul to the Thessalonians. Even when all the lights go out, even in the darkness of death, we believe God has life for us. "For the Lord himself, with a cry of command with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise, then we who are alive, we will meet the Lord in the air, and so be with the Lord forever." We shine the light of that promise in the world. And we do it so when Jesus comes back, he doesn't find darkness. So he doesn't find cold empty churches. So he doesn't find a bunch of burned out Christians. We want him to

find us shining. Waiting with the porch light on, ready for the party to start.

We are bridesmaids. And it is our job to anticipate the joy. It is our job to be prepared. And to make sure we have enough oil to hold the light.

Because Jesus is telling us, we'll need to keep our lamps lit for a while.

We'll need to make sure we have spare oil because it's not going to be easy. There will be hard times and dark days and cold nights. Hope will fade. Others will fall away. And to keep our light going, we will need to have our supply. We'll need that extra oil. What is that oil, that fuel for you? For me it's prayer. Study. Devotional time with God. Worship.

Communion. Service. Done with intention. Done in community. Notice there isn't one wise bridesmaid. There are five. We need one another to be prepared. But we must be prepared ourselves. We can't depend on someone else's oil. The parable makes it clear. We have to have our own oil. We can't use someone else's. We can't rely on someone else's service. Someone else's faith. Someone else's donations. Someone else's dedication to light our own lamp. If everyone depends on the oil

of a few, the light will not last. We must each be ready to have our lamps lit.

We are the bridesmaids for Christ. And we are holding the light. And it is a warning light for a world which seeks shadows. And it is a beacon for those alone in the dark. And it is a tiki torch for those who have lost their joy. And we keep that light shining, because Jesus is on his way.

The wait will be over soon. This dark world won't be dark much longer.

The powers of this world will not last. Death will not swallow us up, but it will be swallowed up forever. For the heavens will open and the skies will roll back and the night will be no more. And we are watching and waiting and anticipating, with our little lamps lit. Glowing with the hope that God loves this world. And has not forsaken it. So find your oil. Find your hope and your courage. And keep your lamp trimmed and burning.

The Kingdom is drawing nigh.