

## A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 25:1-13

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"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this:  
ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.  
Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.

When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them.  
But the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.  
But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look!  
Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'

Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps.  
The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil,  
for our lamps are going out.'

But 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.'  
And 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.

Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.'  
But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'  
Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

This story is a story that has vivid images. Seeing the images of the story in your mind's eye is a way of remembering the story. The first image is the contrast between foolish and wise virgins; five bridesmaids were foolish, five were wise. The second episode builds on this, "the foolish took their lamps....But the wise took flasks." In the next episode, "sleep" and "slept" are the verbal threads. The next episode is the trimming of the lamps and the crisis of the lamps of the foolish going out. The fifth episode is buying of more oil and the arrival of the bridegroom. The climax of this episode is the shut door.

The climax of the story is episode of the foolish girls outside the door pleading, "Lord, Lord open for us," and his response through the door, "I do not know you." That's the basic shock of this parable: "I don't know you." Every listener can imagine himself or herself outside the door and the Lord of the universe saying in the kingdom of heaven, "I don't know you."

This is a story to tell with all of the excitement and giddiness of 13-15 year old girls. The translation of "bridesmaids" is fine, but somewhat misleading in a contemporary context. The meaning of the Greek word *parthenos* is "virgin." The Parthenon is the great temple on the Acropolis in Athens dedicated to the virgin goddess Athena. You might download and show a picture of the Parthenon if your sanctuary has digital image capabilities. The

audiences of Jesus and Matthew would have understood this word to refer to young women, age 13-15, who were candidates for marriage. The assumption in 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish culture was that unmarried young women would be virgins. Either translation needs some explanation. For the wedding, the virgins of the village were serving as bridesmaids. In this story were ten bridesmaids; Jesus envisions a big wedding.

The parable assumes that the listeners know the ceremonial structure of a big Galilean wedding. While the exact character of wedding celebrations in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine is unknown and may well have varied in different villages and regions, there are traditional wedding practices in Arab countries that correspond with the wedding celebration in Jesus' parable. The bride and her bridesmaids gather at the bride's father's house in the evening and the groom's party at his father's house. The negotiations for the bride's endowment continue throughout the evening between the fathers of the bride and groom.

Sometime around midnight in a blaze of lamplight, the bridegroom arrives at the bride's house with his company to pick up the bride and take her to his home to become part of his family. With lamps lit, the bride and her bridesmaids and the groom with his friends walk in a grand procession to the groom's home for the wedding ceremony and banquet.

Everybody would catch some sleep in the afternoon and evening of the wedding so they could stay awake late into the early morning hours for the celebration. Weddings were the greatest celebrations of the year in the villages of Galilee. To make a mistake or miss a wedding was a major grief and loss. It is also probable that the stores in a village would stay open to sell items to the guests who would come for the wedding.

In Jesus' story, the bridesmaids are all dressed up and trying to manage their major responsibility in the ceremony of providing light for the bride in the procession to the groom's house. Trimming the lamps involved cutting the wick so that the lamp would provide the greatest light and not be blown out by any wind. The parable describes the differences between the smart girls and the silly ones who didn't plan their oil consumption.

The parable's impact depends on creating a high degree of sympathy for the foolish girls. There is no tone of judgment other than naming them as foolish. "Silly" is also a good translation. There is a pleading quality to their tone in asking their wiser friends, "Give us some of your oil." Everyone can sympathize with their failure to plan ahead in the midst of the frantic preparations for the wedding.

It is with them that we experience the groom's response from behind the door: "I don't know you." So, all of the times when you forget or don't pay attention or go to sleep and forget the reality of the possibility of the coming of the kingdom of God, that's what this parable is about: to get your attention and to focus attention on living every moment in the awareness and the imminence of the full presence of God's spirit.

What does Jesus' parable do? What is the goal of the telling of this parable? The parables make the kingdom present now in the experience of hearing the parable. The problem then and now was that people didn't believe in the imminence of God's government on the earth. After all, the power of evil is very present. If you look out of the window this morning, is there a world of peace and justice out there? Do you expect that to happen tomorrow morning? My sense is that most people then and now live as if the hope of that world of righteousness and peace is only a hope for the distant future.

But Jesus perceived that this new world was present now. He invited people to live and make decisions in the light of the presence of the Kingdom now. Hence, in this parable, the indifference about planning for enough oil is like the indifference we act out by living as if the kingdom of God will only be in some vague, far distant future.

Our lives will be determined by the decisions we make about the kingdom of God now. The goal of the telling of the parable is to make that experience vividly present. It is the experience of suddenly recognizing that our indifference and silliness will have immediate consequences. The first three episodes of the parable are preparation for the panic of the five foolish girls who recognize that they don't have enough oil for their lamps. And they can't walk in the great procession with their lamps out. Their friends who planned ahead don't have enough for both. And when they arrive for the banquet, it is too late. The last three episodes are to be told with the tone of panic and grief of the five foolish girls who have missed the most important social event of the year.

Many scholars have concluded that the delay of the bridegroom was an allegory of the delay of the second coming of Christ (parousia). In this understanding, the whole parable is about the parousia. Their conclusion is that the parable was a creation of the early church that lived in the post-resurrection world awaiting the second coming. My friend, Bernard Brandon Scott, doesn't even include this parable in his great book *Hear Then the Parables* because he is convinced it is not a parable of Jesus.

The problem with this conclusion about the parable is that it limits the meaning of the parable to the early church's experience of the delay of the parousia. The embodied telling of this parable makes it abundantly clear that the parable's impact is not limited to that brief period but is possible now. In light of the prevalence of these wedding customs in the villages of the near east, I think it is fully possible that Jesus conceived and told a parable in which the delay of the bridegroom was a major element. When told, the impact of the parable is congruent with the impact of the many of the parables including the two that follow in Matthew 25.

This conclusion applies as well to the literal interpretation of the parable so prevalent on the Internet who read this parable as an end times parable that means the world is going to come to an end in the near future: next year, next month. The millennialist mentality keeps wanting to set dates as a way of making the reality of the Kingdom of God imminent and present. There is no evidence that Jesus or Paul ever set dates. Whether they thought that the world was soon coming to an end, we don't know. But my sense is

that while the Kingdom of God was an imminent presence for them, the coming of the Kingdom and the full establishment of its reign of justice and peace was not connected for them with the end of the world. It would necessarily entail the end of the world as we know it, which is a place of systemic injustice, violence, and war. But always that was the prelude to the full establishment of the Kingdom of God on the earth.

This telling of this parable of Jesus is then an invitation to make the experience of the coming of God's kingdom a present experience for your listeners.