

November 12, 2023
Matthew 25:1-13
Prudent Discipleship
Michael Stanfield

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ 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.’ ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. *The words of God for the people of God. Let us pray: open our hearts, our minds our souls to the fresh movement of your spirit as we consider these ancient words you have preserved for us Oh Lord, amen.*



Time is of the essence, especially on a wedding day. One newlywed recently took to Reddit to poll users as to whether or not she was in the wrong for starting her ceremony exactly on time, though her parents were mysteriously absent at the start of the service.

The bride’s parents ultimately arrived 15 minutes late and missed the entire ceremony, as they had been in a minor car accident while traveling to the venue and did not have a cell phone to spread the news.

Now, the woman says she feels “frustrated” that her folks didn’t make more of an effort to arrive much earlier, while her parents are “furious” with her for not waiting for them. The bride, who as a Reddit user calls herself *Lateparents*, shared her story in a post that has since gone viral.

“They knew the ceremony time, and my husband and I made it very clear to everyone, both in the invites and in person, that we were going to start exactly at that time,” the bride said. “The venue cost us a lot of money (we paid for the entire wedding ourselves) and we were only able to use it for a limited amount of time, so we wanted to make every minute count.” <https://www.foxnews.com/lifestyle/bride-parents-furious-wedding>



This has caused quite a rift between the bride and her parents. Was she right in starting on time? What do you think



The backdrop of Jesus' parable known as "The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens" is also a wedding. But before delving into the text, it might be helpful to know something about weddings in antiquity.

In First Century Palestine, one's engagement was as binding as the marriage itself. It was really the first stage of marriage, and it took divorce proceedings to dissolve even it.

It is interesting to note that remnants of this practice remained even in the West all the way up until the 19th century. Engagement was considered a serious step by Protestants and Catholics alike.



In fact, the Book of Church Services for Protestants from 1850 (shown here) includes a separate service for formal engagement. It is called a *Declaration of Intent to Marry*. This service was usually held at the church with the families of the bride and groom in attendance, along with church elders or deacons as witnesses.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Declaration of Intention

We,

and

desiring to receive the blessing of Holy Matrimony in the Church, do solemnly declare that we hold marriage to be a lifelong union of husband and wife as it is set forth in the Book of Common Prayer.

We believe that the union of husband and wife, in heart, body, and mind, is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord.

And we do engage ourselves, so far as in us lies, to make our utmost effort to establish this relationship and to seek God's help thereto.

SIGNATURE OF GROOM

SIGNATURE OF BRIDE (MAIDEN NAME)

Dated _____ A.D. _____

MP 8255

Printed in U.S.A.

And here you can see the kind of document that couples then signed and were part of the church record and could also be legally binding.

But as the official authority of Christianity waned in the West, engagement became less and less formal. The *Service for the Declaration of Intent* was enfolded into the Wedding Service itself and has become a kind of solemn oath given by the bride and groom that they are clear about what they are getting into – a covenant ordained by God going all the way back to Adam and Eve – one that is not dependent upon and therefore focused on the them, specifically, or on the romantic love they have for each other, but on their faith in Christ that is at the center of God’s purpose for humanity and that they thus vow will be at the center of their marriage.



So, after the minister gives a short dissertation on the divine purpose of marriage, the bride and groom are each asked to respond positively to the following question:

“Having heard how God has created, ordered, and blessed the covenant of marriage, do you affirm your desire and intention to enter into this covenant?”

It’s a bit like a divine prenup. “Yes”, they both are saying, “I know there will be times I will not like this person, but I vow to try and work it out anyway because we are bound by God.”



Thus, marriage in the Church *traditionally* has always been considered serious business; but it was considered even more so in antiquity. Back then, at the end of the formal betrothal period, the marriage took place:

- on a Wednesday if the bride was a virgin and
- on a Thursday if she was a widow.

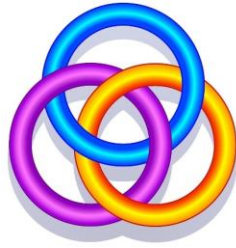
The bridegroom and his party then made their way to the home of the bride.... When the two groups came together, the wedding took place. After this, there was a procession, generally to the home of the bridegroom. There, feasting began that might go on for days. The processions often took place at night when lamps and torches made for a spectacular display.

Clearly something like this is presupposed in Jesus' parable of the bridesmaids. The ten young women were involved in going out to meet the bridegroom; it would appear then that they probably belonged to the *bride's* party. Upon the groom's arrival they would have been expected to take their place in the procession to the groom's home as official bearers of the light on their way to the feast.



And as the parable indicates, the women fell into two groups, five in each; half were sensible and caring enough that they had their lamps and torches oiled and ready; the other five were foolish, in that they took no oil with them. Whether one was using torches or lamps, oil was essential; yet five of the women had waited too long to attain the necessary oil believing they had plenty of time.

The point of the parable is that loving, caring, and faithfulness are connected to being prepared – being alert – mindful of what might be needed in the moment, and ready.



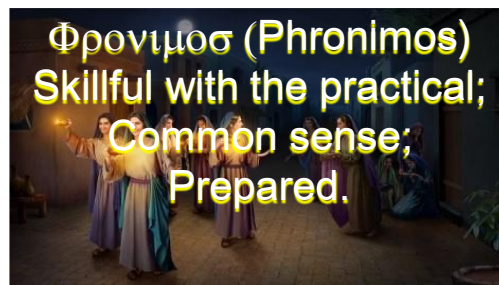
The wedding represents the highest form of connection – complete union between two people - with God in the mix that makes it whole. **The bridesmaids** represent us – Jesus’ disciples. **The bridegroom** is Jesus. It is through him that we experience this ultimate union



As I indicated earlier, this parable is better known as that of “the wise and foolish maidens.”



The New Testament Greek word for wise is “phronimos.” And really, a better English translation of this word phronimos is “prudence”. In the gospel narrative, ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were phronimos or prudent and five of them were imprudent.



According to Webster's online dictionary, to be "prudent" means to be skillful in practical affairs, or to exercise good judgment or common sense when it comes to dealing with people; to be prepared.



The Ten bridesmaids, from the outset, look alike. What makes five prudent and the other five imprudent is their care for the needs of others by their attention to detail. Five show their vigilant love by doing everything humanly possible to be the light-bearers for the groom. Five take a more laissez-faire attitude about the whole thing.

In Matthew, to live in this wise, ready way is to live for the Kingdom, to live for God, to live for the day the Bridegroom will return.



So, it would appear that, when it comes to being ready for the inbreaking of the kingdom, the return of the bride groom, the breaking in of the Kingdom, the dawning of a new Christ consciousness on the human soul – it's the practical, ordinary administrative tasks of life are crucial.

To those who love high-minded theology, great preaching and the world of brilliant ideas about God and God's revelation to humanity, this kind of work is usually deemed as beneath them, inconsequential, or superfluous.

Being one of these types, I can tell you that when I first started out as a pastor, I didn't have much use for the administrative tasks of ministry. Seminary did not prepare me for managing budgets and committees and staff. I knew how to plan what I was going to preach week to week. I had not a clue how important it was also to plan ahead for things like session meetings, stewardship season, and training officers. Surely administration, and management was the session's job.

But what I discovered was that while preaching and teaching and pastoral care were all great avenues for an ego boost, God's love was most often found elsewhere. I was yet to learn what God's love, being incarnate, really meant.

That love - in Christ - needs a human container that is ready. That container is the *community* of faith.

As a pastor, it was my *job* to preach, to teach, to care for the sick and dying and the distressed. But what I had not counted on was that maybe even more central to my calling was paying attention to the overall health of the container – that is the congregation as a whole, the community of faith, to which I was called.

And I do *that* by being a competent manager, a steward of the whole community, a competent administrator who, along with a great administrative assistant, pays attention to the details of preparing for church life.



It is said that the devil is in the details. But only if the details are dismissed as being unimportant. God's kingdom can only be experienced fleetingly in this lifetime. But it *can* be experienced. It is experienced in communities – like Trinity, that do the proper work of preparing as they await God's next coming. And that is done by paying attention to the little things – like showing up for worship every Sunday, preparing the communion bread, running a camera or soundboard on Sunday mornings, tending to the church grounds, planning reasonably well on the committees on which one serves, knowing what is coming next and then being on time and being ready.

Most young seminarians view this as grueling, less important work. I know I did when I was starting out – but you know, I can maintain this attitude only if I assume the call is all about me. If it is all about me, it is easy to get ready for one committee meeting. But ten a month? No thank-you. Yet love becomes incarnate the quickest whenever two or more are what? – *gathered* in his name.

If it's all about me, it is easy to host a group of strangers for one meal or work at the wardrobe for an afternoon. Not so if I am asked to do this regularly, when everything seems to be falling apart and I still have to tend to the demands of living in this old world.

If it's all about me, it's easy to be a peacemaker for a day and show up for a single event celebrating justice. But remaining ready to be a peacemaker day after day in the midst of a political and cultural landscape that appears to encourage a lack of civility if not outright violent bullying, while the bridegroom is delayed, can easily cause me to say, "What's the use?"

If it's all about me, getting myself ready to be merciful for an evening with someone I know does not deserve it can be pleasant; I can pat myself on the back and say what a good boy am I. But being

merciful to such a one when everything you value is under siege, and the bridegroom is delayed, and God seems far off, requires significant sacrifice on my part.

So, it's a good thing it's not all about me and that God is on the way. In fact, this parable of Jesus teaches us that to be ready in the everyday, the practical and the ordinary is to be wise; to be caught short in this area is to be other-wise and it is to risk missing out on the greatest gift God has to offer – the divine wedding – union with God.



So, I ask you, “Are you ready? Are you prepared for a new meeting of Christ that can come any moment? Do you believe the bridegroom is even coming? If not, like the five foolish maids, you might actually lose what you assume is already yours.”

When I was 12 years old, I had a best friend whose name was Jamie. We were very close – so close that a hard lesson learned by one of us was also a hard lesson learned by the other.



One day we both learned a lesson in alertness when we came home from school one afternoon and found that his pet guinea pigs were missing. Jamie rushed to ask his mother about them.

She said very matter-of-factly, “I gave them away because you didn’t take care of them.”

“But I did take care of them!” Jamie protested.

“Jamie,” his mother said, “I gave them away two weeks ago!”

Are we involved in readiness? Are we paying attention to the important details that align with our values and acting on them *daily*? Jesus tells us we need to be ready to move when *he* is on the move. But we also need to remember what the scriptures tell us about the Holy Spirit: it often comes upon our lives like a violent wind.



I don't know about you but that is not the most comforting of images. Janet is from Huntsville, Alabama and three years after we were married, in the fall of 1989 a devastating tornado leveled her home church building, the building in which we were married, along with the surrounding neighborhoods. The empty lot in the left center of this photo shows where the fellowship hall had been before the tornado. So, when I hear "violent wind" this is the image that comes to my mind.



The point is, we should assume that God is present – or will be shortly one way or another even in the midst of what appears to be destructive. Bidden or unbidden, God will come. We therefore had best be ready, because sooner or later, for every one of us, those winds do blow. Whether it is a political climate that appears to threaten the very fabric of democracy, or potential sufferings and losses of every conceivable kind, we had best be ready.



Since I became your pastor, eight and a half years ago, there have been multiple times when it looked as if democracy in this country as we know it might be over – that disaster was a heartbeat away. And you know what gave me hope?



Images of you, the members of Trinity doing the faithful but often mundane tasks of maintaining the church community with love and compassion no matter what is happening in the world – of Bill Kennedy coming by regularly to check on things, of Norm Gysbers planting flowers, of Odell Newkirk mowing the grounds – of Carol Virkler and Bill Daly and now Jim West coming to the

church to practice the organ for worship, of elders showing up at every meeting, organized, ready to go with an agenda month after month. Their faithfulness, your faithfulness, reminds me that come what may, God is faithful.

I used to keep this Calvin and Hobbes cartoon taped to the back of my office door.



Calvin comes marching up to his mother seated in a living room chair, having her morning cup of coffee. Calvin's head is encased in a large space helmet while a cape drapes across his shoulder down to the floor.

"What's up today?" asks his mom.

"Nothing so far," He says.

"So far'?" she questions.

"Well, you never know, something **could** happen today."

Then he strides off saying, "And if anything does, by golly, I'm going to be ready for it!"

In the last frame his mom says, "I need a suit like that."

We *do* have a suit like that.



And that suit is connectivity to God that we experience most profoundly in community with one another – a community that is maintained by everyone doing the little things – the daily, weekly, monthly, yearly work of being prudent – of being ready.

Doing the daily mundane work of being ready is the highest form of faithfulness because it demonstrates the ability to stand with hopeful, loving presence in the midst of despair, in the midst of rancor, in the midst of discord, in the midst of the unexpected – like the groom showing up unexpectedly or like being in a fender bender on the way your daughter's wedding.

So, we need to be prepared – whether it's oil in our lamps or a charged cell phone in our pocket.

Let us pray. Gracious Lord, we confess that like the foolish maidens of the parable, we often dismiss the smaller details of life as being unimportant. Keep us prepared in the little things since it is most often in the little things that you make your appearance known. In so doing, keep us alert and ready for your unexpected return and our reunion with you.