

Foolishness?

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 12, 2023 – Morning Worship on Stewardship Sunday
Text: Matthew 25:1-13

Today's text is one of the more bizarre parables in the New Testament, talking as it does about wise and foolish bridesmaids. It only appears in Matthew where it is part of a trilogy of parables about what New Testament scholars call the *Parousia*. This is a Greek word which refers to the return of the resurrected Jesus to judge the people at the end of time. Important to remember is that the earliest followers of Jesus were expecting him to return at any time. It was only when that didn't happen that the oral traditions we know as the gospels began to be written down. Matthew dates to late first century, most likely between 80-90 CE. This means it was written at least 50 years after Jesus was crucified.

The historical context of all this matters because by the time this and the other "kingdom" parables were written down the followers of The Way, as these early Christians were known, were very confused about why Jesus had not yet returned. It was at this point that the early churches began the slow evolution from an apocalyptic religion focused on "the end of days" into one more concerned with the role of faith and God as foundational to living one's life. This reminds us that those first gatherings of Jesus' followers never envisioned themselves as long term organizations. They expected to be around for only a short time offering support to each other in the form of communal meals, prayers, and even financial assistance as was needed, all while waiting for Jesus' imminent return. But, as this didn't happen, the need to find more nuanced meanings in these kingdom parables began to emerge.

What is so misleading to us as we consider this parable is the whole wedding imagery on which it is constructed. When we think of bridesmaids, the image immediately forms in our minds of young women of various shapes and sizes walking dramatically down some aisle somewhere, wearing similar shades of the same color if not the exact same dress. They are carrying bouquets and perhaps wearing something on their heads. But they are most definitely not carrying oil lamps which they were responsible for keeping filled with oil. We are also lost in the midst of all these bridesmaid details because the entire structure of a wedding during Jesus' time was different than what we think of as weddings today. Weddings were multi day affairs with each part of the celebration carefully scripted and loaded with meaning and significance. At the point in the wedding celebration that this parable is drawing us into the narrative, the bride and groom have already made their vows to each other and the wedding banquet has been underway.

So why are the 10 bridesmaids of this parable not at the wedding banquet? The bridesmaids in our wedding celebrations these days would all be sitting at the head table drinking too much. What were these 10 bridesmaids doing waiting outside some house and what's up with the oil, and the foolishness? All excellent questions! The bridesmaids' role in this wedding was not to be there to support the bride or celebrate their relationship with her. The bridesmaids had one important function and that was to be there, outside the house of the bridegroom, to welcome the happy couple back from their wedding and light their way into the house (the bridegroom's father's house) where they would spend their first night as husband and wife. That's why the lamps and why it mattered that they had enough oil. In the parable, five of the bridesmaids took care to bring extra oil with them in case the bridegroom was delayed in getting to the house with

his new bride. They are the “wise” ones. But the other five bridesmaids were in a hurry or distracted or whatever so they did not think to bring extra oil in case of a delay. These are the “foolish” ones. Of course, in the parable the bridegroom and his bride were delayed and the extra oil was needed. The wise ones had the oil they needed to trim their lamps as they hear the wedding party approaching. The foolish ones asked them for some of their oil, but they refused saying they wouldn’t have enough to do their job of lighting the way if they gave the foolish ones some of their oil. Instead, they told them to go to the oil dealers to buy more oil. Setting aside the obvious question in our minds of could they even find an oil dealer open so late at night, the story continues with the bridegroom returning while they were out on their “fool’s errand.” When they finally made it back to the house where yet another celebration was happening inside, they found the door locked and the bridegroom would not let them in. So, they missed the party. More importantly, they failed at the one responsibility they had been given – to be ready to light the way for the bridegroom and his bride into their new life.

Wise and foolish bridesmaids. Any of us who have been to weddings in recent years have certainly encountered both. The wise bridesmaids at these weddings are the ones who take their responsibility of being there to support the bride seriously. They have extra tissues and lipstick and all sorts of little things only they would know the bride might need. The foolish ones are the ones who are just there for the party and have no qualms about having a good time, no matter how disruptive or embarrassing their behavior might become after more and more alcohol has been consumed. So, we get the idea of wise and foolish bridesmaids. We’ve met some of both over the years. But what exactly does any of this have to do with how Jesus wants us to live our lives?

Well, remember when I explained that this is a kingdom parable about the *Parousia*, the end of time? And, you remember that in a parable, everything stands for something else? In this parable, the bridegroom is Jesus and he has been delayed in returning as promised. No one knows when he will come but they know he is coming. The 5 wise bridesmaids are the ones who put all their effort into being ready for when he comes. They have extra oil in case he is delayed. The 5 foolish bridesmaids did not take their roles seriously. They did not put the effort in ahead of time to make sure they had enough oil in case he was delayed. And while they were trying to buy more, he returned and everyone else went into the Father's house and the foolish bridesmaids were left out in the cold. The message of this parable then is a simple one: No one knows when Jesus will come back to judge the people on how faithful they have been and invite those who are worthy into his Father's house, heaven. So, you have to be ready all the time.

Once we understand the imagery of this kingdom parable in its own context, it's easy to understand this rather basic message. We are to be ready for Jesus' return whenever that will happen. We cannot lose faith in Jesus just because he is delayed in returning. Those of us who are wise enough, strong enough in our faith, to trust in this will ultimately be rewarded with admittance into the home of Jesus' Father God in heaven. Those who lose faith, get tired of waiting, and decide to focus on other things will not. It's really that simple. Also, it's worth noting that this and other kingdom parables are the primary focus of conservative, evangelical churches whose emphasis is always on individual salvation. Have you been saved? Have you been "washed in the blood of the lamb?" Have you made the commitment to live your life within the constructs of a very narrow perspective on what it means to be a follower of Jesus, as our faith defines it? These

are not moot questions, dear ones. They are the driving force behind so much of what we see roiling our society in the so-called culture wars splashed across the newspapers and the news media every day. This view of Jesus is an exclusive, transactional one which focuses only on the individual and the “purity” of that person’s way of life. All one needs to do is live life following a checklist of “right” things at the same time one avoids the even longer list of “wrong” things. Don’t be gay or anything other than “straight” and true to your birth gender in every circumstance. Don’t read certain books or watch certain movies. Don’t associate with certain people, especially those who don’t follow the church’s rules. Unless of course your goal is to convert all those sinners to the one true way. I could go on and on here, but you get my drift. The kingdom parables are all about life after death, what happens to you after you die if you’ve been a good person faithful to Jesus. That’s what makes these kingdom parables apocalyptic. They are focused on life after death, not on the here and now. At least not in the sense our theology teaches us.

What this comes down to in the end are two entirely different ways of looking at Jesus. Is Jesus only your “ticket to heaven,” the gatekeeper of living a glorious life in the hereafter? Or is Jesus the one who teaches us and shows us what it means to live life each day as a humble servant of God, someone who believes to their very core that God is in the middle of every moment and that absolutely everyone is equally beloved of God? Dear ones, our way of following Jesus, of working to live into this lifelong task Jesus has entrusted to us to love God and love the other as God has loved us, is not one which focuses on what happens after we die. I think we all think about that, of course. But it is not our primary focus. It is not the reason we love God and follow Jesus. Will living a life following Jesus as best as we are able lead to a joyous reunion with our loved ones in heaven? I

certainly hope so. I'm counting on it, in fact. But it's not the reason I live each day as a person of faith. This promise of eternal life is just not one I dwell on. Being the hands and feet of Jesus in this life, that's my focus. I suspect it's yours too. Living as a shining beacon of hope to everyone we meet – that's the reason I'm here every Sunday, the reason I'm a pastor. I want to make Jesus real to every person I meet so that he is so much more than a theological concept or a gateway ticket to a glorious hereafter. I want to make Jesus real by living as a follower of Jesus in such a way that his love shines out through me. I always want to have enough oil in my lamp for this to happen.

And, if you're here in this church, I'm thinking this is how you feel too. In fact, I'm pretty sure it is. Only people committed to the mission and ministry of this church would work as hard as you all did to make yesterday's Bazaar #1 the tremendous success it was. Only people committed to the mission and ministry of this church would be excited about the prospect of two more Saturdays filled with all the work needed to make two more Bazaars equally successful. And it's not just the Bazaars you work hard to pull off. You support this church in so many ways which is why we're able to be here, week in and week out, fulfilling our mission of being God's beacon of light and hope on this little gentle rise of a hill in southeastern CT. Your commitment to this church is especially showcased on this our annual Stewardship Sunday because not only are we celebrating all your hard work on the bazaars, but also your ongoing financial support of this church whose admitted purpose of existing is to make a difference, however small it might be, in the lives of our own members and the lives of the community. Dear ones, you are the reason we are here. Your support in so many ways is why we are able to continue to do God's work in such unique and wonderful ways. You, each of you, is

UCC Westerly and on this Stewardship Sunday, that's really what we are celebrating. You.

I've always known this, to be sure. But, as always happens on Bazaar days, I am reminded of this very powerfully. Sitting back in my corner in the Book Nook, I had the pleasure of speaking with so many of our guests yesterday. And, once they found out I was the pastor, they had a lot to tell me. Several people even sought me out as pastor to tell me how wonderful you all are, how incredible the bazaar is, how it's by far the best bazaar they've ever been too. That's not new. I hear that every year, and I know you do too. But what was different in what I heard yesterday was the number of people who talked to me about the wonderful sense of love and peace and warmth this church has as soon as you walk into it. One lady was almost in tears as she spoke with me about it. "I don't know what it is," she said, "but there is just something so different in this church. Kindness, gentleness, love, warmth – they're all tangible here. It's really incredible!" Of course, I always invite folks to come and join us for worship and perhaps some one will. That would be lovely. But, and this is the important thing dear ones, whether they come or not, we have already accomplished our goal of being a beacon of light and hope to the community if people feel that way when they come into our church. People know we are here, and they know we are committed to living life as followers of Jesus. Will that eventually draw them a little closer so that perhaps they will even join us for worship one day? Maybe. I hope so. But, that, in the final analysis, is between them and God. Our job is to be here, to keep our doors open and our smiles and words welcoming and loving. Our job is to keep adding leaven to the community "bread" we are baking here and trust that God has our best interests at heart. And to always count our blessings, here at UCC Westerly, for surely they are legion. May God

bles us in all we seek to do as God's people in this church. May our beacon of hope and love continue to shine brightly in our community and may the people who need to be a part of us find their way here. And may we remain ready to greet them and welcome them when they do. Amen.