

Matthew 25: 1-13

The Wise and Foolish Maidens

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This summer we are looking at the stories of Jesus. Jesus was known for his parables. We have dozens of his stories. The volume of Christ's stories that were recorded is stunning. All the gospels include strings of these stories, one after another. Whole chapters are devoted to stories in which he describes God's values or illustrates God kingdom. Fully one third of Jesus' teachings come in the form of parables. Jesus must have been a terrific story teller. He could spin a yarn so it would draw you in. Even now as you listen to the parables, they grab you.

You may feel pity for the prodigal son or admiration for the Good Samaritan. You may feel comforted by the knowledge that when a shepherd loses one sheep he will go out to find the missing one even if he has to abandon the whole flock.

Other stories leave you scratching your head. Last week we talked about the parable of the vineyard in which the workers all got paid the same amount, even when they were hired at various times in the day. The parable left us wondering why the last hired were paid the same as those who worked all day, and we pondered the difference between fairness and grace. Some of Jesus' stories are not just confusing but upsetting. Today, we have another story that is very hard to understand.

Today's parable is one of those that is hard to understand. Ten maidens were waiting to be part of a wedding. They were dressed and each one had a lamp for the ceremony, which would go on for days. They were scheduled to be part of the bridegroom's procession. But the bridegroom was delayed, and so they had to wait. Now some of the maidens had filled their lamps with oil and they were ready. But the others arrived without enough oil for their lamps. So they asked for oil from the 5 women who

had plenty, but these five whom Jesus calls wise refused to share. So the foolish maidens were forced to go to the merchants to buy oil, and while they were gone, the bridegroom appeared and went in. The wedding began without them, and the doors to the feast were closed. The women who had gone for oil were left out of the celebration.

We have come a long way from the shepherd who leaves the whole flock to search for one lost lamb. Now we have half the maidens who need leniency but there is none to be had. No one will share with them. No one will wait for them. No second chances in this story. What in the world is Jesus saying here?

In the first place we have choices. Jesus told a story about two different groups of women. Everyone in the story understood the rules of these weddings. You had to wait for the bridegroom, and then when he came you would be invited into the wedding feast. Everyone understood the stakes of what would happen when he arrived – the potential to enjoy a good feast was available to all. Presumably the possibility of being left out was also understood.

Yet one set of people in the story organized themselves to get the oil ahead of time. They planned ahead. They prioritized this occasion. They anticipated the possibility of a time crunch when the bridegroom would arrive. Jesus calls these maidens wise. You wonder what the women without oil were telling themselves. The deadline does not really matter. There is always wiggle room. You don't have to worry. Someone will help me. The rules should be flexible. Things will work out. Do you know anybody like this? Have you ever dealt with someone like this?

When you look at the broad sweep of the Bible it is a story of human beings coming into their fullness. They start in a garden when God hovers, and they grow from children to adults. One of the stories that captures this transformation is the Exodus. When the Hebrews had been enslaved in Egypt. They did not make decisions. They were slaves. They were told where to work and when to work. Where

to live and how to order their lives. You might assume that when they escaped from slavery they would be deliriously happy, but it was a process of maturation. They had a steep learning curve. The good news was they were free, but the bad news was they had to accept responsibility for their lives. Suddenly, the buck stopped with them. There were times when they begged for Moses to take them back. That was not what they wanted, but they wished for a respite from adult responsibility.

Do you ever have any days like that? I think most of us do. I think this is why restaurants that serve comfort food are so popular – we want to go home to grandma’s, and become little and eat mac and cheese at the end of the day- many days. There are days when you want to throw a little fit. I am busy. I did not have time to get oil. I did not see how low the oil was. It is not fair. I had a hard day. I don’t deserve this.

Mary Oliver wrestles has several poems about the fact that we are the only ones who can make decisions for our lives.

Jesus says we make choices every day. **Be wise.**

Secondly, we cannot save other people. What did you think would happen when the women without oil asked the others for help? Lend us some of your oil. What did you expect Jesus to say? The women who were wise did not seem tempted to give their oil away. They understood that they would not have enough. They recognized that they could not save anybody. They were only responsible for themselves.

Twelve Step Programs are designed to help people deal with their addictions. I think the reason that these programs are so successful is because they begin by addressing the temptation we all have to blame others for our own decisions. The 12 step programs have remarkable success because they begin with the basic notion that we are all responsible for our own actions. They start refusing to allow people to excuse themselves, when they fall short. They remind people that we each have only one life, and we

are in the driver's seat in our lives. We are the designated drivers in our own lives. One of the steps among the 12 which can be a turning point, is the task of making an honest inventory of your deeds. Personal transformation often depends on acknowledging that we are masters of our destiny, and no one else can save us. The partner program Al Anon – helps people who live with someone who is addicted to refuse to save him or her. It is hard to see, at first, how intertwined this behavior can be. The wise maidens say it all – There is not enough oil for all of us. You cannot coast on my oil, because my lamp will go out.

Many of us justify our heroic behavior by telling ourselves we need to save someone. In the process we turn the people we love into dependents. Jesus never expects us to save others. He wants everyone to thrive, and often that means we need to refuse to save someone else, because we cannot do it.

Finally, life has limits. A lot of people get mad about this parable. What kind of bridegroom would be so impatient? He made the maidens wait for him; where is the quid pro quo? A lot of these parables don't seem fair. Jesus is making a point. He is not trying to make nice. He says you cannot do it all. There are trade-offs.

The fact that life has limits is really good news, but sometimes it seems like bad news. Jesus says- you cannot have it all. That is an illusion. There will be trade-offs.

I wonder if those foolish maidens did not want to be ready because they did not like to sit around and wait for the bridegroom. They did not want to sit idly by and wait. Maybe they liked the adrenaline that comes from cutting it close. Maybe they saw no value in waiting. Can you remember the last time you were idle? Our schedules are pretty full.

Have you seen the report on the study about Americans and vacation? We regard it as a guilty pleasure. Americans have on average 14 days of vacation a year and a majority of people leave 2-3 days unused. We don't see the value of idle time. We don't recognize the point of it.

Jesus says that there are feasts in this life that you will miss, if you do not set some limits, and schedule some downtime, and be prepared to wait on occasion. He says the failure to set limits is the essence of folly. You will miss the feast of life.