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First Presbyterian Church
November 8, 2026
Matthew 25:1-13

Gracious God,
We come this morning carrying all kinds of wisdom — the things we've learned, the things we've been taught, and the things we're pretty sure we know. But sometimes the wisdom of the world gets in the way of hearing your wisdom. So open our minds and hearts. Give us the courage to look at familiar stories in new ways, to question what we have always assumed, and to recognize your surprising grace in unexpected places. Speak to us today, and help us hear the invitation you are offering.
Amen.

"Bridesmaids"

Weddings! Sometimes what can go wrong does go wrong, as today's parable of the 10 bridesmaids reveals. A groom who is so late the bridesmaids fall asleep? Honestly, ladies, I think we should rename this parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids (which its commonly called), the parable of the woefully late groom. I mean! I officiated a wedding once where the groom was 45 minutes late, and when he and his groomsmen finally showed up – I suspect after knocking back a few – guess who wasn't messing around? Me!

So let's just start there today, shall we? Because after reading this parable through fresh eyes, I've decided the normal spin we give it, doesn't work for me anymore. I'm a little tired of blaming women for men's incompetence. So with that, I ask you to keep an open mind as we give a fresh look at the parable of the woefully late groom. And, as we learned in the parable series I did in September, if the parable goes down too easy, we 've likely missed the point. So let's find a new one.

In this story, there are 10 bridesmaids – 10! –that's a lot of bridesmaids. Half of them came prepared for the wedding, and half did not.

Back then, bridesmaids waited at the bride's parents' home for the groom to arrive. And when he did, the bridesmaids were supposed to light their oil lamps, and go outside to meet and greet him. Then, with lit oil lamps in hand, they would all walk to the groom's home together. At his house they would meet his parents, the wedding would take place, and then afterwards there would be a big party. (In a lot of ways, not much has changed.)

But for whatever reason, in the story Jesus tells, the groom is late. Really late. Hours late. Well, what do you do when the groom is late? I officiated at a friend's wedding once where the groom's parents were 1 ½ hours late! Boy, was my friend mad. We waited and waited and waited. Well you know what her Dad did to pass the time? The wedding was at his house. He opened the bar. But I digress . . . The marriage did not last.

In the story Jesus told, the bridesmaids fell asleep! They waited so long they got tired and took a nap! Finally at midnight, the groom shows up. The bridesmaids leap into action! They take their oil lamps, light them, and rush off to greet him.

But guess what? Only five of them have oil left in their lamps. The other five used up all of their oil waiting for the groom! So you know what they do? They ask the five who still have oil left if they can borrow some. And you know what those five say? "No! If we share some with you, there won't be enough for us! Go get your own oil!" Now, where are those bridesmaids supposed to find oil at midnight in ancient Israel? It's not like there's a Walmart around the corner! And by the way, where is the bride?

Amazingly, those 5 bridesmaids find a shop open at midnight that sells oil, and after buying it they get to the wedding, find the door closed, knock on it, ask someone to let them in and are told, "Stay out!"

Now does that sound very nice to you? It sure doesn't sound very nice to me.

But here's the kicker, after telling the disciples this story, Jesus doesn't then say, "Disciples, don't act like those bridesmaids and hoard all of your oil!" Jesus doesn't say, "Don't be mean like those bridesmaids!" Jesus doesn't

even say, “If someone knocks on the door, answer it!” No, Jesus says, stay awake and be prepared. Because if you aren’t -- well, too bad, too sad.

I don’t know about you, but I don’t like that. It flies in the face of everything I believe about Jesus. I don’t believe Jesus slams doors in our faces; I don’t believe Jesus wants us to selfishly keep all of our oil to ourselves. If he did, most of the Bible stories we love so much would have to be re-written. Take, for example the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 with 5 loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus doesn’t say in that story, “Sorry guys, you should have packed your own lunch.” He tells the disciples to feed the hungry people. In the story of the Good Samaritan, he doesn’t tell the guy who fell in the ditch, “You shouldn’t have been so clumsy!” No, he applauds the Samaritan who stops to help the guy out of the ditch. Heck, in one story he even pays the people who worked one hour the same thing he pays the people who worked eight hours! That’s the Jesus I like! How about you?

It’s at this point that the customary way of interpreting the parable is preached (And by the way, I have preached that version): that the bridesmaids were rudely received because they weren’t prepared. The usual logic is that they should have been prepared with enough oil to outlast a late groom!! Now how were those bridesmaids supposed to know the groom would be that late? C’mon man! Can we stop blaming those poor bridesmaids for something that never would have happened if the groom had bene on time *to his own wedding!* Is the moral of the story really be prepared? If so, Jesus sounds more like a Scout leader than, well, Jesus.

Plus, it makes for a terrible allegory about Jesus. If the bridegroom is Jesus, we’re all in trouble because he’s a careless guy — and mean to boot. Where’s the Jesus who turns five loaves of bread into a meal for 5,000? Or Jesus-the-Jew who knew that hospitality to strangers was the most important practice of his faith? And where is that bride?

Theologian Diana Butler Bass calls this the 'worst wedding ever.' Who wants to go to a party where the groom is late and nasty to the guests, she writes? And where is *that* bride? Maybe she doesn’t even like the groom.

So let's look again at what this parable evolves around, and my I boldly suggest it's not the oil, but the words "wise" and "foolish." In this story, "wise" is the word *phronimos (fro-NI-mos),* meaning practical wisdom, shrewdness, savvy, being sensible or prudent. Matthew uses *phronimos* seven times in his gospel. But there's another word for wisdom in biblical Greek, *sophia,* meaning divine wisdom, knowledge of sacred matters, insight to mystery. That's not the word Matthew uses; Matthew doesn't say these bridesmaids are full of divine wisdom. The "wise" bridesmaids are *phronimos,* full of practical wisdom. They brought flasks of oil to refill their lamps. Contrast that with the "foolish" bridesmaids, who are described as *moros* in Greek, a word that can be translated into English as flat, dull, insipid, or nonsensical. So the witticism in the story is the contrast between those who are full of practical wisdom and those who are dullards, maybe dreamers even, who possess little or no common sense.

Who does the world praise? What do we teach to children? Of course, it's phronimos. Ideally, we want our children to be practical, prudent, and sensible. Be prepared, we tell them. And look, I get it! In case you think I've totally gone off the deep end this morning, I'd remind you I have two sons who are both Eagle Scouts, so I understand the motto "be prepared". Behind every Eagle Scout is a well prepared mother!

But let's consider who the original audience was for this parable. Matthew's community was Jewish, so when they heard Jesus tell a story about foolish and wise bridesmaids, their minds would have gone to their Wisdom literature. i.e. the book of Proverbs. And proverbs are witticisms, funny and memorable contrasts full of imaginative poetry and provocative quips. They wouldn't have heard this story as a parable, an allegorical tale like we do.

So, maybe Jesus had a different idea in mind then be prepared. Certainly Paul did. Three decades *before* the Gospel of Matthew was written, the Apostle Paul penned these words to his friends in Corinth:

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is

foolishness with God. For it is written,
'He catches the wise in their craftiness',
and again,
'The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise,
that they are futile.'

Paul doesn't use the word *phronimos* here. He uses *sophia*. In this letter, and in his other letters, Paul makes this contrast repeatedly — there are two kinds of wisdom, one, a conventional, common-sense wisdom that is really foolishness, and the other, "divine wisdom," that is the source of life and salvation.

Could it be, that this Is the same point Jesus is making in this story? That the bridesmaid's wisdom, i.e. the wisdom of the world, is really foolishness?

I think it would be. After all: what do the bridesmaids get for their wisdom? They get to go to a party in the middle of the night when they are exhausted, where there doesn't seem to be a bride (maybe she knows something they don't?), and the groom is, at best, a bore. And they're locked in with him at this miserable affair in the wee hours of the night!

Does that sound like fun to you?

Honestly, the ones outside the door seem to wind up with the better end of the bargain. Think of some of Jesus' other stories about weddings and parties — the last will be first, don't invite your rich friends but invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" — and just a few pages before today's story in Matthew, Jesus told a parable about a king who instructs his servants: "Go into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet."

Did the "wise" bridesmaids, those full of common sense and practical wisdom, go to the wrong party with a bad bridegroom? Maybe the real party hadn't started yet! Sometimes *phronimos* isn't all it is cracked up to be. And what of the "foolish" bridesmaids, the ones locked out, the young women standing on the streets? Were they about to receive an invitation to the King's

wedding, the party-to-end-all-parties? And just maybe they weren't going to be just bridesmaids there — but they would finally be the Bride?

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God, Paul writes.

Which may mean the words at the end of Jesus' wisdom story-proverb now sound less like a threat and more like an invitation — not "be prepared" or you are going to Hell (which is the conventional interpretation), but "be discerning" so you end up at the right party. Understand the difference between the "wisdom of this world" and the divine wisdom of God: *Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour*.

Amen.

God of surprising wisdom and extravagant grace,
Remind us that your ways are not always our ways, and that what the world calls foolish may be exactly where your wisdom is found. Keep us awake to the possibilities of your kingdom. Give us eyes to recognize the invitations we might otherwise miss, hearts generous enough to share what we have, and courage to choose the party where everyone has a place. And when we find ourselves standing outside a door, remind us that your story is not finished, and your invitation is always bigger than we imagine.
In the name of Christ, who keeps turning the world's wisdom upside down.
Amen.