

Who's Foolish?

Dr. Cynthia E. Huggins
Centre Street Church, UCC
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Matthew 25:1–13¹

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten young bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the groom. Now five of them were wise, and the other five were foolish. The foolish ones took their lamps but didn't bring oil for them. But the wise ones took their lamps and also brought containers of oil.

When the groom was late in coming, they all became drowsy and went to sleep. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Look, the groom! Come out to meet him.'

Then all those bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps. But the foolish bridesmaids said to the wise ones, 'Give us some of your oil, because our lamps have gone out.'

But the wise bridesmaids replied, 'No, because if we share with you, there won't be enough for our lamps and yours. We have a better idea. You go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were gone to buy oil, the groom came. Those who were ready went with him into the wedding. Then the door was shut.

Later the other bridesmaids came and said, 'Lord, lord, open the door for us.'

But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'

If you ask me, the parable of the ten bridesmaids is a bit of a nightmare. First, were they bridesmaids or virgins? I've heard it both ways. The original Greek word is *parthenoi*, which can be translated as either "virgin" or "young woman." The two translations most used by Bible scholars are split on the matter; one uses virgin, while the other says bridesmaids. The fact is that it doesn't really matter, because a bridesmaid was almost certain, at that time, to have been a virgin anyway, so either word works.

Second, what exactly is going on here anyway? Where are they, and why isn't the groom already there? Well, the ancient Jewish custom was that the groom and his attendants would travel to the home of the bride's parents and then escort the bride and her attendants to his parents' home, where the wedding celebration would begin. Why does he not get there until midnight? We aren't told. Maybe the bachelor party went on a bit longer than expected.

And finally, what's with this "I don't know you" thing? At the end of the parable, the groom says to the five so-called foolish bridesmaids, "I tell you the truth—I don't know you." Just because

¹ Common English Bible

five of them forgot to put lamp oil on their shopping lists, they're shut out of the wedding completely? What happened to "love your neighbor as yourself"? What happened to forgiveness and grace? The way that this parable, which Jesus is relating to his disciples, is often interpreted is unusually harsh and unforgiving. Where's the love?

And when we think about it, which of these ten bridesmaids are really being foolish anyway? All ten of them showed up with lamps and oil. The only reason that five lamps ran out of oil was that the negligent groom didn't show up when he was supposed to. It got late, the bridesmaids all fell asleep, and they probably didn't blow out their lamps before they drifted off. I mean, when I go to bed at 8:00—which is, apparently, late for Downeast—I often fall asleep reading without turning off my bedside lamp.

Let's continue to pursue this "Who's really foolish here?" line of investigation, shall we? When the five bridesmaids without extra oil say to the five bridesmaids with extra oil, "Lend us some of yours," what happens? The so-called wise bridesmaids reply, in what I imagine to be a rather whiny voice, "No, there might not be enough to go around. Go buy your own."

Now, I contend that this is a really bad answer for two reasons. First, "there *might not* be enough to go around"? Really? They didn't even bother to find out? Not very "love your neighbor" -ish, in my opinion. And second, it's the middle of the night! The hardware store isn't open. Where are they supposed to buy lamp oil in the middle of the night?

Back to the question "Who's really foolish here?" The five so-called wise bridesmaids aren't so much foolish as just selfish and mean spirited. We could also ask why they felt the need to bring extra lamp oil in the first place. If I'm driving to Bangor, I don't take "extra" gas with me. I fill the tank before I leave and trust that if I need it, I'll be able to buy gas along the way. You don't consider me foolish for that, do you? Maybe for other things, but not because I don't carry a can of gasoline in my back floorboard.

But neither are the five so-called foolish bridesmaids truly foolish, except on one point. When they're told, in the middle of the night, to "Go buy your own lamp oil," they listen and they go. And when they return later—and we aren't told whether they found extra oil or not—the door is shut and they aren't allowed inside.

The parable is one of Jesus's favorite teaching devices, and the four Gospels include somewhere between forty and fifty parables, depending on how you count them. If you look up the word *parable* in Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, you'll find this definition—a parable is "a usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude."

Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, in her own inimitable way, disagrees with that definition. As she writes, “That assumption we have that our job is to find the moral instruction in these texts is what I like to call, The Parable Trap . . . Parables aren’t about morals. Parables are about truth—hidden, unyielding, disruptive truth.”² She goes on to remind us that Jesus said, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” He didn’t say, “The morals will set you free.”

If we’re looking for a moral in this parable, that’s easy. “Be prepared or lose out.” But that so-called moral depends on us swallowing—hook, line, and sinker—the notion that the irresponsible groom and the five selfish bridesmaids are morally superior, while the five so-called “foolish” bridesmaids are somehow less than.

This will seem like a leap, but stick with me. Remember way back in the Book of Genesis, where God shows up in the Garden of Eden one evening and can’t find Adam and Eve? “Where are you?” he calls out, and Adam answers, “We’re hiding because we’re naked.” And God says, “What? Wait a minute. Who told you that you were naked?” Adam and Eve had stopped listening to God tell them who they were, and they’d listened to a snake instead.

In this parable, the five bridesmaids aren’t foolish because they didn’t bring extra lamp oil. They’re foolish because they listened to those whispering voices, in the middle of the night, telling them that they were inadequate and ill prepared. They listened to those voices telling them that before they could meet the groom, they’d sure better shape up and pull themselves together. They’re foolish because they listened when those voices told them that they needed to provide their own light or remain alone in the dark.

Those five bridesmaids were foolish because they allowed themselves to be shamed into thinking that they weren’t worthy to be included in the wedding feast. They listened to a whispering snake telling them that they were naked and had no business approaching God.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, whose sermons we’ve used on Zoom a couple of times, describes this particular parable as a story in which “self-reliance is overrated.” As she explains it, at the end of the parable the bridegroom said, “I don’t know you” because those five bridesmaids hadn’t just come to him and told him they needed light. And we should never, ever be ashamed of our need for Jesus, the proverbial bridegroom. In fact, you could argue that the only thing that God truly asks of us is to admit our need for God.

We’re not being foolish when we show up unprepared, short of answers, scared of the future, feeling unloved. That’s called being human. We’re foolish only when we hide those things from God and try to “fix” ourselves, rather than trusting that God loves us and wants the best for us.

² Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Listening to Snakes and Bridesmaids,” *The Corners* (2-26-2023).
<https://thecorners.substack.com/p/listening-to-snakes-and-bridesmaids>

We're foolish only when we allow other people to shame us into feeling unworthy, inadequate, insignificant. We're foolish only when we listen to any voice other than God's.

In this shared ministry with which God has blessed us at Centre Street, it's easy to slip into thinking that since we don't have a "real" pastor, we have to find ways to do it all ourselves. But that, my friend, is a recipe for a failed ministry—a failed church. The truth is that in a shared ministry, it becomes even more important to *not* rely on ourselves, but to rely on God instead. Instead of listening to those voices whispering in the middle of the night, reminding us of all our inadequacies and weaknesses, let's listen to God's voice leading this ministry forward.

We can run out in the middle of the night, desperately seeking lamp oil, only to return to a closed door and the words, "I don't know you." Or we can trust that even though we fall far short, over and over again, of being perfect, nevertheless light will be provided for us.

So the next time a snake whispers to you in the middle of the night, "Hey, guess what? You're just not good enough, not brave enough, not smart enough, not holy enough," don't listen. That snake is a liar—and you are not a fool.