

A LESSON ABOUT SHARING

Some people seem to be convinced that there is only one mood, one emotion, one attitude that is appropriate for Christians. That makes it hard to learn anything from Jesus, since no matter what we are seeing or hearing about Him, we have to force it into the mold of one mood, one emotion, one right attitude. Indeed, many arguments between Christians take place because people who see different sides of Jesus are determined to persuade others that their experience of Jesus is the valid one.

In my own naiveté, I keep suggesting that the people of the “church” need to keep studying the New Testament records with more focus and a greater willingness to learn from what they are finding there. Jesus could be enormously compassionate and kind to people who came to Him broken or sick or in trouble. But Jesus could also be “hell on wheels” to those who felt superior to Him and most everyone around them. Jesus is many-dimensional, and those who suppose that they have graduate degrees in understanding Him or His Message and mission are usually seeing only what they wanted to see before they even started. That is where we all start out, by the way.

I had a Mentor in New England years ago who kept suggesting to a small group of us (all seminary students and getting pretty sure of ourselves) that we needed to spend more time on the stormy, north side of Jesus. Some people, he said, see only the judgment and miss the love. But he added that most of our group saw only the love (*agape*) and missed the passion and the anger that drove Jesus to risk everything – no matter what – to stay obedient to God. Winn Hall, by the way, taught me more about Intercessory Prayer than anyone else I have ever known. Is there a connection between anger and prayer? This is not that sermon. But have you ever noticed how often Jesus was angry when He healed?

Time to move on to today’s passage. We are in the 25th chapter of Matthew. Palm Sunday is told in the 21st chapter. There are only 28 chapters in Matthew’s Gospel. In short, Jesus is in the last few days of His life on earth, and He knows it. Time is running out, and there are still so many things His followers do not know and do not understand. So Jesus’ most cryptic and uncompromising teachings come to us as He teaches in the temple during the last few days of His life among us.

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There are ten maidens waiting for the bridegroom to appear so that they can join his procession and follow him into the banquet hall to celebrate the wondrous wedding. This is a parable, and I do not want to spend a lot of time on the symbol connections. You can argue, of course, if the connections are not clear to you; that is always fair. But I get to start.

Jesus is the bridegroom. He is also the Messiah. “WE” – meaning all Israel – have been waiting for Him for years: waiting and hoping He would come and take us into the great celebration – the great wedding – that would take us all into the great unity of the family of God, where we would all be reconciled – in joy and peace and love – to God, to Jesus, to each other. The church is the bride of Christ.

Jesus is about to usher in the Kingdom of God in ways unexpected and exceedingly surprising to everyone. It is to be a fellowship of believers in the midst of a broken world, where we “try on” the ways and realities of the Kingdom of God right here, right now: loving God, and also supporting and loving each other. And the promise is clear that it will go from here, where it can only be partial and incomplete, to realms beyond, where the fullness of God’s plans will unfold.

So Jesus tells a number of parables at this time – all of them, He says, pointing to and telling us about the Kingdom of God. He hopes it will awaken enough of His followers to what is really going on and prepare them so that they can live through the horrors of Good Friday and the glories of the Resurrection, and come to Pentecost, where the true plan will go into effect.

But not everyone is ready, willing, obedient, or even interested enough to join in the glad celebration. Jesus knows this. So those of us waiting for the Messiah to come are represented by these ten maidens. Five of them are wise. The other five are too lazy, too disinterested, too preoccupied, or too full of their own hopes and dreams to take Him seriously.

Most of you know that I have been in many Bible Study Groups over the years. Most of them start out being more simplistic and shallow than most of the groups around here are today. Nevertheless, many groups start out concluding that this is the “Boy Scout” parable. The message is “Be prepared.” And with that, let’s wrap it up and move on.

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Only, most Boy Scouts don't mean "Be prepared for God's Kingdom." Or "Be prepared for the Holy Spirit to come into your life and change everything: your goals, your purposes, your attitudes and approaches to everything in life." If you think this parable is no deeper than the Boy Scout motto, guess which group of maidens you belong in? I will give you a hint: it is not the five wise ones.

On the other hand, concluding that this parable is only a simple moralism about "being prepared" is our last chance to move past it without shattering consequences. If we cannot get off the ride before Jesus' actual story starts to click in, then fasten your seat belts and hang on.

Have you ever known a Sunday School Teacher who was willing to teach her kids that sometimes you do not share with those around you who need something you have and are begging you to help them by sharing it? This parable flies in the face of everything we think we know about Christianity. Who has more authority to tell us what Christianity really means: the people we have been listening to, or Jesus?

"Our lamps are going out; give us some of your oil." "No," they answered. If we give our oil to you, there will not be enough for us. Go and get your own oil." (A slight paraphrase, but no change in the meaning.) What is Christianity about? It is about sharing what we have with the poor and needy. Well, that may be our opinion, but that is not what Jesus teaches us. Christianity is about going with the bridegroom – no matter what it takes. Even if it costs us our reputation as a good and caring person.

This must be a misprint. Jesus would never tell such a parable. Oh really?! *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even his own life, he cannot be a disciple of mine."* (Luke 14:26) In case we think Jesus was kidding: *"Truly I tell you: there is no one who has given up home, or wife, or brothers, parents, or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not be repaid many times over in this age, and in the age to come have eternal life."* (Luke 18:29) If we keep changing Christianity all around to make ourselves look good in our own eyes or in each other's eyes, how does that qualify us as followers of Jesus?

We have come to it again, haven't we? Jesus is setting it up so that we will be obedient to the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit – not to our own whims or to our preconceived notions of what is good or bad or right or wrong. Haven't you realized yet that it was the “good guys” who killed Jesus? It was not the thieves, the murderers, the adulterers, the scum of society. It was the most religiously conscientious and sincere people in the story. Wanting to be good and do good does not make us Christians. Hell, every Hindu, Jew, Buddhist, Muslim, agnostic, humanist, and atheist wants to be good and do good, at least to those he or she cares about. Every person from every race and tribe on earth, rich or poor, wants his peers to think well of him. And Satan plays off of our *best* motives – not our worst motives. Don't we know yet that the Elder Brother does more damage to the Kingdom than the Prodigal Son does? We become Christians when we give our lives to Christ Jesus – not when we decide to do good deeds.

What if God loves you? Okay, fine; so let's get back to living for others. But what if God loves YOU? I know, I know; so we love our neighbors, feed the hungry, help the poor, do lots of good deeds.

But what if God loves YOU? Sent Jesus for you? Wants a love-bond with you – unto eternity? Do we ever dare to get off the merry-go-round – the circularity – even for a moment? We love our children so they can love their children so they can love their children – but we are not important; it's always somebody else down the line. Yet that way, they cannot ever be important either. Our lives are important because other people are important? According to our “Gospel,” nobody is ever important except for what they do for others. But what if God loves YOU? What if you cannot keep passing the buck? What if the baptism is real? YOU are my beloved son. YOU are my beloved daughter.

Okay, so maybe I am supposed to love myself. That will be better for others too, if I then love my neighbor as myself. We really do have a hard time hearing, don't we? Love myself; get more self-centered than ever. Have I ever tried that without making a complete mess of it?

What if *God loves you*? If we ever open ourselves to that, it converts us. We get born anew – born of the Spirit. All the codependency has to go. All the subtle idolatry has to go. We cannot go on worshipping our children, our wives, our husbands, or our plans to be successful and to do so much good that they will build monuments in our honor.

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What if God – the Omnipotent – REALLY loves you? Like Jesus keeps trying to tell us and reveal to us. Not ourselves, not others, not the society or the church around us – what if GOD loves you? If that ever gets through all the shields and “buts” and “ands” and qualifiers, we find ourselves changed forever. The Damascus Road. Pentecost. Baptism. And slowly we begin to realize that Jesus has been telling us strange parables all along. We try to hear them in as shallow a way as we can, because they are so disturbing. It’s best never to spend more than a few minutes on any one parable at any one time (as one of our own Disciple Bands recently proved). Be very careful or Jesus might get you – might reach you. And then all the simplistic values of the society around us will come crashing down around our ears. Then where will we be?

Of course, there is more depth to this parable than we notice at first (or second or third). There are things we cannot do for others, share with others, give to others – no matter how much we may long to do so. Can you loan somebody your character? Does it make any difference how much they may need it? Can you give somebody else your relationship with God, even if it would save their life? What is “the light” being talked about in this parable?

At Pentecost, the flame danced over each person’s head. That means you each have your own flame – your own light – and if you do not tend it, not only do you lose it, but all of the rest of us lose it too. Your spiritual gifts and purposes – your vocatio – are nontransferable. I may not like it; this may not seem just or loving in my eyes. But it makes no difference what I think. You are a unique and precious child of God’s, and you were created with special gifts and special awareness. You might be a blessing in my life by being who you truly are, but you cannot give me those qualities and gifts, however much I may benefit from them. Watching you may cause me to try even more diligently to call forth my own gifts, but light is light and we cannot control or bestow it. We can only let our own light shine – let what we have been given shine forth. Even that depends on how much we trust God.

Oh indeed, there is much that we can share, and that is a blessing and a delight. But some spiritual gifts and realities are nontransferable. We either come into our own or the light fades more and more. You know this is true. You have seen it happening all around you for as far back as you can remember. It is one of the reasons we end up getting serious about our faith.

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So what is the oil? The oil is prayer. Not the words spoken on the outside, but how much attention we pay to the Spirit who speaks on the inside. The oil is the way we nurture our light. We can pray for others, but we cannot do another person's praying for them. The five foolish maidens were not nurturing their spiritual gifts. They thought it was supposed to come naturally. They thought that staying close to God was just a given – something they were entitled to. “Jesus spent hours in prayer all through His life, but He was spiritually slow compared to us. We're all okay. We're doing the best we can. And the spiritual gifts we were born with worked pretty okay for a while, so what's the worry?” The worry is that we have to be born again – born anew, born of the Spirit – for the New Life to take full effect. Without constant prayer and the Spirit's guidance, our lamps begin to flicker more and more and get dimmer and dimmer. It gets harder and harder to see where we are going, or why.

Until one day we hear something a lot of Christians told us we would never hear: *“Truly I tell you: I do not know you.”* You never gave me much of a chance to know you. You never cared about me or my Kingdom, or any of the truth or purpose I came to share with you. I tried from time to time to start a conversation with you, even to share the road with you. But you wanted nothing to do with me. I am not angry or upset with you. I simply do not know you. There is no way I know of to bring you in here, because you have turned away from everything I have tried to say or do or show that would put you on the WAY that leads to here. You have not wanted anything to do with this banquet or this faith family or this celebration of light and love. Nor have you had any interest in any of the disciplines or values or any of the desires or learning that make it possible. *“I do not know you.”*

And so another of the “sacred cows” of the liberal church bites the dust: “All Are Welcome.” Often buttressed by another made-up doctrine of recent Christendom: “Unconditional Love.” We do not learn either of these from Jesus. He is too honest, too wise, and too faithful to go for the pabulum that pleases the masses. It may please them, but it also misleads them – into serious detriment. True LOVE – as most people who have tried it know – is, in its own way, more demanding than the LAW.

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That's the end of the parable. If Jesus did not soften it, why would I want to? But we do know a way for a foolish maiden to get into the banquet, even after the gates are closed – even after hearing the cold and icy words, *“I do not know you.”*

There is still a “way in,” and we only know it because Jesus taught us that too. And the truth is, it is how each of us got into the banquet ourselves. The Way is easy to tell about and exceedingly difficult to manage, and nobody is ever able to pretend or fake it. It is one of the deepest secrets of our WAY. It is called REPENTANCE.