

“Weddings are Like That”

Matthew 25:1-13

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

“Be Prepared.” It is the motto of the Boy Scouts and the summary of this message, “Weddings Are Like That.”

In the Gospel, Jesus uses an ordinary story of a wedding to illustrate the extraordinary truth that disciples need to be prepared. Good weddings are usually good through good preparation. The foolish bridesmaids in the story, unprepared for the long delay of the groom, found their lights going out at the critical moment when they were needed. The lack of preparation has spiritual results: in the story, the unprepared are shut out of the life to come.

We need good preparation because, even with it, crazy things happen. Here are wedding stories from my colleagues:

- At one wedding, the groom and the bride’s brother had a fight. I don’t know if it was before, during or after!
- At another, the best man dropped the ring, which rolled under the bride’s wedding gown. Modesty intervened and the groom searched for it, but he still ended up under the gown!
- Another best man dropped a ring which rolled into a floor heating grate. The service continued without the ring, which was later retrieved by lowering someone into the duct to get the ring.
- A flower girl threw up on the bride’s gown.

My wedding story was the late afternoon summer wedding of my best friend from high school in a church without air conditioning. It was hotter than...well, it was hot! A few minutes into my wedding sermon I hear this “BOOM!” and look over to see a bridesmaid flat on the ground. She locked her knees, cut off the blood supply, and passed out. Weddings are like that.

That's probably why Jesus used one as a parable to tell us to be ready. The story is based on the 1st century Palestinian wedding custom of the groom going to his father-in-law's house to get the bride and bring her to his own home. But other details of the story may confuse us, and rightly so, because they confuse scholars, too! Why ten bridesmaids and lamps? We don't know. Why was the groom delayed? We don't know. Would it have made sense for the bridesmaids whose lamps were running out of oil to be able to go and buy at midnight? We don't know.

We do know that in some cultures, including the 1st century world of Jesus, weddings go on for days (remember Jesus' first miracle). It's reasonable to think that in a small town some shopkeeper would be open, either to make a buck or out of compassion. Believing this is no more of a stretch than believing the true wedding stories I told you earlier.

These unanswered questions, and the complete absence of any mention of the bride, is why some scholars think that Matthew has taken a story and made it an allegory. In the allegory the groom is Jesus, the bridesmaids are the disciples, the delay of the bridegroom is the delay of Jesus' second coming: the parousia, the return of Jesus after his resurrection to bring in God's final realm. The bridegroom's arrival in the story IS the parousia, and having oil (as the wise bridesmaids do) are deeds of love and mercy in obedience to the Great Commandment: showing love and mercy to the least of God's children in Matthew 25:40 as we discussed in Confirmation this last Tuesday.

So what? What has this story to do with us? Let us first agree that we are the bridesmaids, the disciples who wait for Jesus. We may or may not wait for his second coming, but we "wait for" him in the sense of serving others in his name as so many of us do and as over 90 of us did yesterday at "Stop Hunger Now."

Let us secondly agree that you cannot tell wise from foolish disciples from looking at them, or us. That's why Jesus tells us that there were both: you can't tell by looking. All have come to the wedding, all have lamps aglow with expectation; all have on their gowns. We could not guess that five were foolish.

It their readiness, their preparation, that makes the difference. Five bridesmaids are ready for the groom to be delayed, and five are not. The wise have enough oil for the wedding to start on the groom's timetable; the foolish only have enough oil for their own timetable. Five are ready, five are not.

Readiness is less about waiting for Jesus' second coming and more about living the life of the Kingdom every day: that Kingdom for which coming we pray every Sunday, that quality of life and love described by Jesus. Either way, it's the long run that's hard. Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year. Being merciful for an evening is pleasant; for a lifetime requires mental, emotional and spiritual stamina. Being married for a day, a month, a year is not as demanding as being married for a lifetime. When marriages falter it takes two people to fix them. One cannot do it alone.

It also means being prepared for joy as well as pain. Robert Fulghum, a Unitarian minister, tells the story of a wedding he performed in his book *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* (New York: Villard Books, 1989, pp.148-151). Two brothers in the Dakotas married about the same time: one handsome, the other a toad. The handsome brother married a beautiful woman; the toady brother used to sing in a toady voice and married a frog. They lived near one another and raised families. While their marriages worked they were not really satisfactory, either, though an outsider would never have known. The children married and raised children of their own. Then, the handsome brother died of a heart attack at age 50 and the wife of the toad was killed in a car accident.

Rev. Fulghum learned all this history when the surviving brother and the surviving wife came from the Dakotas to Seattle to consult with him. These two had looked on one another with secret but abiding love for years. After the two deaths the toad brother would come to his sister-in-law's house to have supper together and do the dishes together, singing old hymns while they worked. They sometimes weeded her garden and talked for hours about life in general, but neither spoke of feelings: in a small town there was something not quite right about it, you know? But one night while drying plates he started singing "I Love You Truly." She chimed in and they looked at one another and knew.

So that started a conversation with the first concern "What will the children think?" So, after considering all the implications they decided to elope. They found Rev. Fulghum in Seattle through friends of friends. What they didn't know was that "the kids" knew everything all along. About the unsatisfactory marriages and the silent endurance and the love that bloomed over a kitchen sink. The kids had known and watched and learned about love, and moved from dismay about what **might** happen to fervent hope that it **would** happen. The very night Rev. Fulghum met with the wedding couple he got a call from a daughter who said that if he was going to marry them, the family was coming.

Sure enough! A ten car caravan from Fargo, North Dakota was the blessing of the couple. When the couple walked into Rev. Fulghum's house on a Sunday afternoon expected a simple, quiet ceremony, their children and grandchildren were waiting in the kitchen and back hall. As the bride and groom stood before the minister, their families came quietly into the room, faces wreathed in smiles, tears streaming down their faces. Such a moment!

A grandchild pulled the plug out of the emotional dam by shrieking "SURPRISE!" and the whole gathering became a joyful hugging-and-kissing contest. When order was restored Rev. Fulghum pronounced them married, as indeed they were.

Besides a happy ending to a wonderful story, it seems to me the connection to our text for today is to be prepared: not only for adversity and waiting, but for the joy of the coming of the bridegroom. Some of us have so steeled ourselves against adversity that we have forgotten how to enter into joy: the joy of life, the joy of faith, the joy of living as disciples of Jesus Christ.

This joy, this life of gratitude, is not determined by outward circumstance but by inner stance. All of us have, or will, face adversity. The question is will we let it define us, or will we define it? Like the bridesmaids, will we set our own timetable and expect life to adhere to it, or will we prepare ourselves with enough oil to give light through the seasons of darkness?

Dorothy Long, a long-time member of this church known to many of us and battling cancer, has given me permission to tell you that she is prepared for whatever comes, that she is ready. And I know she is, watching her day by day. So do others who know her far better than I. But she has prepared long before this illness, as anyone who has known Dorothy's lilting smile and engaging conversation will tell you. Giving of herself to so many others, she has acquired a lighted lamp that will never go out.

In this life of faith, you cannot really tell the followers of Jesus apart. We all sleep, we all have lamps, we all are excited about the wedding, we all know how to sing "Lord, Lord." Deep in the night, when some are trying to fan a dying flame to life, we know what foolishness looks like. Don't wait 'til then. Prepare. Live life prepared. Amen.