

The Wedding

November 9, 2014

Shepherd's Grace Church

Then the Kingdom of Heaven will be like this. There were 10 bridesmaids who went out to meet the bridegroom. All 10 took their lamps with them. 5 of the bridesmaids were foolish, 5 were wise. The foolish bridesmaids took their lamps but they took no oil with them. The wise bridesmaids took flasks of oil with their lamps. While they were waiting, they all slept as the bridegroom was delayed.

About midnight there was a cry! The bridegroom has arrived, everyone come out to meet him! All 10 of the bridesmaids rose and trimmed their lamps. The foolish bridesmaids, however, said, "Give us some of your oil for our lamps are nearly empty." The wise said, "No! There will not be enough oil for all of us if we give you some. You should go to a merchant and buy some for yourselves."

While the foolish were still away, the bridegroom and all who were present entered the hall and the doors were locked. Later the foolish bridesmaids returned and pounded on the door. "Open for us," they demanded but the bridegroom answered, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you!" Stay awake therefore for no one knows the day or the hour. (Matt. 25: 1-15) (Also read Joshua 24: 1-3, 15-18)

Of course I chose to serve. How could I not! My father had served. My grandfather before him and his grandfather before him! We believed the scripture! We knew the trials of our people! We understood all that God had done for us! He had led us out of Egypt! He had protected us and provided for us in the wilderness! He had saved our lives and had given us a sense of purpose. "Once we were no people. Now we were God's people!" Of course I would serve!

I was amazed that anyone could make any other choice. How could people living in our country come to the conclusion that anyone or anything other than the Lord was responsible for the blessings that had been bestowed upon us? I know it was a long time ago but I believe in the history of our nation! I believe we exist for a purpose, a calling higher than the purpose of the moment! I believe that God called us into being as a nation so that we could live out the highest principles of people; so that we could honor the One True God! Still, there were many others who made another choice. Many believed differently than I did!

Generations passed since the words of our governing documents were written. Many came and believed they were entitled to what they had because they had been born to places of privilege. They did not believe it was necessary to serve. They believed instead in a sort of manifest destiny. They believed the land we lived in belonged to us because God had given it to us! They believed that those who were in the land when we arrived had no rights! They believed that those who were in the land had no purpose! They even questioned whether those in the land when we arrived were really people!

Our ancestors wrote that God had led them, God had protected them, God had guided them to a place where God would give them abundance forever! They wrote that it was a land flowing with milk and honey! Generations later however, many had forgotten. Many had come to believe their possessions

were their God given right and as a result they served those possessions and not the principles upon which our nation had been founded! The possessions had become more important than the principles!

When God called us out of slavery and oppression, he called us to worship! His plea to the king was, “let my people go out into this wilderness to a place where they can worship Me!” (Exodus 7) When our nation was founded it was for the purpose of worship! Our nation was founded on a freedom to choose, on a freedom for all to recognize not the blessings of the land, the abundance of wealth but the blessings of God!

As time passed, however, people forgot about the suffering and struggles of our ancestors. Those times had little to do with them. They were more interested in wealth and accumulation! Some hoarded what they produced while others were left struggling in the streets with barely enough to eat! Over time we found ourselves in conflict with others. We found that other nations wanted what we had and were willing to fight to take it! We believed in what we had, our way of life and we were willing to fight to protect that way, not only for us but for all people! We did not hold that others were “less than” but that all were created by the One True God!

Those were the things my fathers went to war over! They trusted the leaders who gave them assurances they were fighting for those things that were promised to them in the early years. They trusted they were fighting for the rights and freedoms of all people and that everyone in our nation, those who came originally, those who were already there, and those who would come in the future should have the same rights! My fathers served not only to fight for things but to protect and to defend ideas and principles, the notions of a God who had and continues to have our best interests at heart! They believed in the words spoken by our ancestors!

Today, however, we go to war over what we have. We go to war over possessions and the protection of a way of life. It seems our service is not to our God but to ourselves! I am wondering if our service is placed correctly or if we have chosen other gods? Do we continue to believe in the God who led us out of slavery and oppression or do we serve our possessions, our dreams of possession, our hope for a more comfortable life here in this place?

Still, I serve! I serve because of the hope I have; because of the possibility that one day, our nation might rise up and live out the true meaning of our calling! I serve because I believe the God who led us out of slavery will lead us into love! I serve because the God who led us out of oppression will lead us into freedom! I serve not the past and not even the present but the future where my children will live! I serve so they might know peace. I serve so they might know shalom, a sense of “nothing missing and nothing broken.” Serve, Of course I serve!

In the military, I was injured. My physical injuries were healed and my body works well but I still remember the terror of the attack! I have nightmares. I seek help for the mental anguish I suffer but it causes me to lag behind others. I am not able to process information as quickly as other people. I try but it just doesn't come to me easily!

I don't have many friends. I think it is because I seem different! Many think I am slow or stupid! I know I am neither but it is difficult to talk! I do have this one friend though. He has been my best friend. He has helped me get what I need! He has made sure I have gotten to see people who could help me. He has made sure I always have enough food and a warm place to eat! For the last year we have been working on his new house; actually it is an addition to his parents house! We finished it just a few days ago and he was supposed to leave to go get his fiancée. I was to be his best man but I had a flashback!

I had to wait and stay in the hospital for several days! I tried to get him to go on but he would not leave me! He said it would be ok and that he would never get married without his "Best Man."

Finally, I was well enough to travel and we went off to the place of his wedding. We arrived late at night but he said that would not matter. When we checked in, the hotel clerk shouted loudly and the whole wedding party opened their doors. They came out to the railing and watched as we checked in, all of them talking excitedly. The women were beautiful and the other men smiled broadly at my friend as he finished checking in.

After we were registered, we went to our rooms and changed. While we were getting ready, a few of the women left the hotel but when it came time to go in to the wedding ceremony, the groom did not wait for them. He went in to the wedding because no one told him to wait! He did not know all who were in the party and he assumed that if there were any missing, others would make him aware, explain to him why the time was not yet complete! He went in because he had been waiting and all was supposed to be ready.

Just as he had been delayed because of my difficulty, others were delayed because of their own issues. There can be good reasons for delay. I am sure most would say my friend's reason was a good one. There are also reasons not quite so good. Most would say the delay by the bridesmaids was not for a good reason. Delays however can be accommodated if people are made aware. When my bridegroom friend closed and locked the doors to the wedding hall, he was not aware! He did not know!

So it is in the passage Matthew offers today, our parable players might include the 10 bridesmaids, Jesus as bridegroom and my friend who served because his parents had served and because of tradition but without full understanding of what it means to truly serve, to be humbled and willing because of something bigger than yourself. There are other players in the parable however. All the guests are players as are all of us! We are invited to hear, to see, to understand the fullness of what Matthew is challenging us with. Give a listen!

The kingdom of heaven will be like this! What have we learned in the last several weeks listening to Jesus' teaching in parable. When he says the kingdom is compared to, often he means that the comparison points out flaws in the world, the created order that will be corrected in the kingdom to come. The Pharisees and the scribes will understand that God's justice is not like the justice of the world. People will understand that God will not needlessly destroy even those who seek to destroy God!

Today, however, Matthew's Jesus says the kingdom is like. That statement has been used to demonstrate a characteristic of heaven similar to a world situation. Today, Jesus is claiming such a similarity. There will be a wedding in the kingdom. It will not be like worldly weddings but it will be carried out using customs and traditions made known to the world. This will be done so the world can recognize all that is taking place! The wedding will be the union of Jesus and the church. The church will be the bride of Christ and will be courted, betrothed and wed according to Jewish traditions and customs.

The church, the people who want, long for, look to a new relationship between God and the world is sought by Jesus in his first coming! John the Baptist prepares the church for this new relationship by inviting the church to be cleansed and purified. The Hebrew word is *mikvah*. It means to be washed both physically and spiritually. John's invitation can be understood as part of the ritual of Jewish matrimony. Those eligible to be brides are prepared then they are courted. Jesus courts the church by his message at the sea of Galilee. "Repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (4.17) Repentance is an invitation to turn away from the life of this world and toward the life God offers. Acceptance of this invitation is the commencement of *Betrothal*, a period where the couple is married in every aspect except the sexual one. Mary and Joseph were betrothed. Those who accepted Jesus' invitation to repentance entered into betrothal.

Finally, the groom would leave for an extended period of time to prepare a place for him to live with his bride and their new family. We can recognize that we, the Church are in this period now. Jesus promised he would return for us. "In my father's house, there are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you and if I go, I will return and take you to be there with me, for where I am, there you will be also." (John 14.3-6)

This is the understanding we have from Jewish custom and Jesus' invitation for us as the Church to be wed to him. Today, we are given a picture of his return. The bridesmaids all run out to meet him just as we hope we would. We want to be like them, preparing everyday for Jesus' return, excited for his arrival. More specifically, we want to be like the 5 "wise" bridesmaids. We want to be prepared for His return so that he will be happy we have been waiting on him. We want to have all our needs met and all our expectations covered. Jesus is coming! The bridegroom is coming! At last, we think, "Let the party begin!"

Like the 5 wise, we wake and hurry down to where he is. Those people who came with us...they can take care of themselves! They can get to the destination properly and "on time." We have to make sure we get there! We have to make sure we have enough for ourselves and we admonish others who didn't prepare as carefully as we do! We have been invited and there is nothing that is going to stand in our way! We have been invited and we want to make sure we have the best seat, the freshest dress, the straightest crease in our suit! That is what Jesus taught us to do...right?

Jesus taught us to be like the wise, right! He taught us to keep our treasure in this world, to keep our oil in our lamp so we could hoard it, so we could keep others from having the light. That's what Jesus taught us, right!

He taught us that when others were coming to find him we should send them away, mislead them, confuse them so that when he came He would not know them...right! He taught us that we should never tell Him who they were so that when they came to the door seeking salvation and an invitation to the wedding he would send them away weeping and wailing into the night! That's what Jesus taught us, right!

Today, the trap in Matthew's parable is for us! Today, we are the ones who get caught up in the confusion of the kingdom! Today, we come wanting to hear the story and say, "yes! I am wise! I am aware that Jesus is coming and I am going to be prepared! I am going to be saved!" We are the ones who know Jesus and we want to know that our salvation is assured! We are the ones who fret and fuss over religious law! We are the ones who would rather make sure that each one of the 613 commandments have been kept! That's what Jesus taught us! Right!

Of course by now you are already 5 steps ahead of me! Of course Jesus did not teach us to store up our treasures here on earth. In fact, he said just the opposite didn't he! He said that treasure stored here would rust and rot and be eaten away. We are to store our treasure in heaven! Jesus did not teach us to keep the word of God to ourselves. Instead he taught us to share the "Good News" so that all might know that indeed the kingdom of heaven has come near! He did not tell us to lead others astray or send them away. He said, "let the little children come to me!" When he heard they were being kept away he became indignant! (Matt. 5-7)

The "wise" of this world have read the parable of the bridesmaids for centuries and have always lauded the fact that they were saved! They have gone to bed at night without fear for their salvation was assured! They have cared for their eternal needs. They have accepted the groom, Jesus and they have willingly wed themselves to him...except that the him they have wed themselves to is not the one who is to return!

The groom that God promises is one who is responsible for redeeming all of creation! That is God's will! God wants nothing to be left behind! Everything is to be saved! (John 6: 37-39) His return will be one of great fanfare and acclaim! Everyone will know, those who have come to believe and those who have not; those who are prepared and those who are not. His hope, his intention is that all will be saved but He knows that some will choose not to be part of God's kingdom. They will instead spend an eternity absent God's presence!

The message I believe he wants to convey to us today, however is that those who are wise should be wise to the ways of the kingdom and not only the ways of the world. He knows that the world teaches us to take care of ourselves. The world teaches us to look out for number one. The kingdom, however teaches us to take care of one another! The kingdom teaches us to "Love one another!" His message is about the coming of the kingdom and the desire He has for all of us to make sure that all of us know the power of God and the desire God has to know all of us!

His message to the "wise of the world" is that we should all share the light. To withhold light from others so we have enough for ourselves is not the way of the kingdom. God does not withhold even his only son! How can we even think of withholding the "Light of that One" who is coming into the world!

The wisdom of the kingdom is that it is not the wisdom of the world. The wisdom of the kingdom is in the understanding that all are important, all are special, all have unique purpose and are treasured children of God! "Let the little children come to me!" That is his message and we, those who would be wise must relearn what it means to repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near!

When the groom locks the door, he will not gloat over those left behind. He will sorrow and grieve that "He never knew them!" He will regret that no one cared enough about these "little ones" to make sure he knew they were coming! His hope would be that before the door was locked someone would throw themselves at his feet and plead for their presence! "Wait!" he wants us to exclaim! There are others whom we have told about you! Their return has been delayed but they know you and they are supposed to be part of this wedding! Do not close the door on them! Get to know them! See how devoted they are to you. They were misguided in their desire to serve you but they do have a desire to serve you! Wait! See!

Listen to what I am saying here! When we all get to heaven, there will be great fanfare and we will rejoice that we are there but there will also be a conversation! We will have a face to face with Jesus and in that conversation there will be what the book of Revelation calls "the judgment." Jesus will sit with us and review the work of our lives. The fact that we have accepted Him as our Lord and Savior will be at the top of that review and will ensure our entry into the kingdom, but if that is all we do with our salvation, He will be disappointed!

Our responsibility in salvation is to do the work of the kingdom; to do the will of God! What is that will for us? It is the same as it is for Jesus, to make sure that nothing of God's original creation is lost! Our work is to make Jesus known to others and to make others known to Jesus so that when the time comes he can look at them and say that which we long for him to say to us: *"Well done, good and faithful servant! Now enter into the kingdom that has been prepared for you since before the foundation of the world!"*

Our acceptance of Jesus is enough to get us into heaven! God's grace is sufficient for all of us (2Cor. 12) but it is not all God wants us to know about the kingdom. We cannot simply be the wise of this world! We cannot "save ourselves" and let others suffer in ignorance! We must serve God in our salvation, recognizing that our salvation comes not from us or anything we might do but from God's desire to love and cherish us! How can we withhold that love from others!

How indeed? Serve? Of course I will serve! I will serve the ideals of our country. Yes, God has led us out of slavery and bondage! He led the Hebrews out in the Exodus but he led us out of religious oppression of a king and government so oppressive that people were not allowed to worship!

In Exodus, God says to Pharaoh, "Let my people go into the wilderness so they may worship Me!" In the 16th century he said to the king of England, "Let my people go so they might worship according to their beliefs and desires to serve me!! In the 18th century, His Holy Spirit moved our forefathers to write the words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all people are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; these rights include life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness!"

Serve? Of course I will serve! I will serve these ideals out of a belief expressed by Martin Luther King. "I believe that one day, America will rise up and live out the true meaning of our creed!" Serve! I will serve because I believe in the future of our nation, in the future of the coming of the kingdom, in the future where no religion will be established which prohibits the free exercise of God's Grace and offer of salvation!

This is Veteran's Day weekend where many recognized and remembered for their service. This weekend however, we need to be the wise bridesmaids to them! We need to recognize that the system of service to our veterans is broken, that medical and mental services are delayed and denied causing them to suffer unreasonable pain for the price they paid for our freedoms and liberties! They served! They served because they believe in the ideals of our future! They did not fight for their present but for their children's future and we owe them that future, a future where neither God nor Country shuts the door on them saying, "I never knew you!" We owe them the marriage to God that God desires because they are precious and honored and God loves them. (Is. 43.4)

Serve! Of course I will serve! I will serve to see that each of them comes to *The Wedding*, that each of them is known by the groom and that each of them knows the groom. After all they did for me, how could I do less for them. They did not withhold even their lives from me! What I have to share, what we all have to share is that life in eternity! Serve? How can we do less? Amen!