

You know the story.

There was gonna be a huge party: a wedding feast or celebration to rival the biggest soiree you can imagine. And the most handsome groom was gonna come calling on ten intelligent, charismatic, beautiful, virtuous, strong women, who would bear torches, and help this young man welcome his bride like Arthur welcomed Guinevere.

But something happened; the bridegroom missed his Uber, or got detained finishing arrangements for the party, or maybe he was just waiting for CNN to tell him the final vote tally, and he was delayed; so delayed that he didn't arrive until well after midnight.

The text tells us that some of these women were more prepared than others. Five wise women brought extra lamp oil; five foolish women didn't plan on needing additional supplies. The wise women were prepared, but not prepared beyond their own provisions, and they were unwilling to share with the others.

Therefore the foolish women (I don't like this characterization of foolish, and I'll say more about that in a minute!) in need of provisions leave in the middle of the night to seek out a dealer of lamp oil. As luck would have it, the bridegroom arrives in their absence, and he invites the remaining five bridesmaids to come with him to the party. When the other five finally arrive from their errand, they find the party closed to them, and the bridegroom refuses to acknowledge their presence.

I want to submit to you this morning, that the way we choose to interpret today's text, and others like it, has substantial ramifications for how we understand God, and our place in the world.

The ancient media, and the medieval media, and even the modern media want to package this story into a neat little allegory. Jesus is our bachelor, or bridegroom, and his return has been delayed. We don't know when or how he's going to return, but we do know that he will return. The light of our lamps is our faith in his return. The oil is our obedience, discipline, and readiness to be alert for his return. The wise are those who are prepared; the foolish are those who are

unprepared. Preparation will be rewarded with entrance into the party, God's realm; Unpreparedness will be met with a closed door: a lack of recognition and the denial of entrance into God's realm.

Well...consider me an alternative media source, because today's text isn't an allegory, it's a parable. And I think we create significant harm in hearing this text as allegory.

I will grant you that there are some good things we can take away from an allegorical application. I wouldn't disagree that we need to be alert for God's presence, and prepared to respond to God's call, and obedient in actions and choices that reflect our convictions. Moses and Miriam, Mary and Jesus, Mary and Martha, Paul and Silas, the saints we celebrated last week, all reflect the convergence of alertness, preparedness, and obedience. Would that all in our world model such discipleship!

But there's more bad than good. In an allegorical application of our text we end up assigning specific representation and meaning to specific characters – we categorize, and we stereotype, and we invent ways to make the text support the systems that are around us. We find ways to imagine ourselves as the most enviable characters, and our enemies as the least desirable characters. But more than anything, we find ways to justify our privilege, our comfort, and our status. Some are chosen, some are not; Here are the exact values of the in-crowd, here are the precise values of the out-crowd. Here's the blueprint for having the right values.

The unintended consequence of such an allegorical application is this: The allegory, in this instance, speaks the language of commodity, but neither God, nor God's people, nor God's world operate in a commodities-based market. Communion with God is NOT a commodity. The value of God's light doesn't have diminishing returns and the dwellings of God's people do not have enforced occupancy levels.

It's not a good thing that five women are ignored, one, because their alienation stands in stark contrast to God's radical hospitality and grace, and two, because this winnowing process is arbitrary at best, cruel at worst. Yes, the allegory wants

to remind us that faith, or commitment, or understanding is not something that can simply be given or lent to a neighbor like a can of lighter fluid or a cup of sugar. That is true. But it's not the whole story. We can't give something to our neighbors they have to reconcile for themselves. But we can give them love. And we can give them empathy. And we can give them encouragement. And we can be witnesses of how to keep the flame of faith alive as we wait for God's presence. In other words, the allegory affords zero opportunity, and zero incentive for those deemed wise to be generous to those deemed foolish.

But the parable (yes, the parable!) gives us a bit more leeway. Because parables don't force us to assign meaning or representation to each character. Instead, the parable, if we listen, encourages us to find empathy with the characters we meet, especially those whom we may not see as neighbors.

So I mentioned I don't like that word foolish, and I especially don't like it as a characterization of half of the ten women in our story. And honestly, I'm not all that crazy about the word wise.

Miriam-Webster's dictionary tells us that both foolish and wise can be markers of judgement and understanding. One who is wise is characterized as a person marked by deep understanding, and having a capacity for sound judgement, and also as showing or exhibiting such sound judgement. One who is foolish often lacks good sense, or the ability to exhibit sound judgement or discretion.

But wise isn't always ideal. One who is wise can also possess inside information, or be crafty, or shrewd, or even insolent, smart-alecky, and fresh! And foolish can be a really cruel description, because it can sometimes mean insignificant.

Well, when I read this story as a parable, I'm not drawn to the wise women, because honestly, to me, they seem pretty crafty. They feel a lot more like scheming contestants on the Bachelor, than they do role models for faithful service. And my heart aches for the foolish women, because I think what they are really being labeled as is insignificant. Not only are they ostracized by their peers, but they are rejected by their host. And what is their crime? They didn't bring enough provisions to an event where the host was too inconsiderate to be on time. And (here's a Disney shoutout to my millennial audience), if Jesus, the

bridegroom is like Gaston, handsome but dismissive; charismatic but inconsiderate, I don't think the story is painting a very accurate image of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer we've come know and love.

The allegory allows us to think about what we have to do to make sure we're not left out. The allegory lives in a zero-sum gain world. The allegory affirms our privilege, tells us to be content in our comfort, even if it's at the expense of our neighbors.

The parable, on the other hand, forces us, and not in a comfortable way, to think about what we need to do to ensure that our neighbors are not left out. The parable makes us ask ourselves:

Are we wise in a way that uses sound judgment?

Or are we wise in a way that is crafty, one that allows someone else to be on the outside, so we can be on the inside.

And the parable lets us see how much we confuse God's world with Caesars; how we keep seeking to use Caesar's systems – economics, politics, military might – to inform what we believe God's world will be. The parable provokes us to see our neighbors in a new light:

Is our neighbor really that foolish, someone lacking the pristine discernment and unquestioned righteousness that we have?

Or is the real truth, that we have deemed our neighbors as being insignificant, and therefore not worthy of, not entitled to, not valuable enough to share in our provisions?

Friends, when I read this parable, I don't get distracted by this talk of empty lamps, and slamming doors, and time-stamped receipts. When I read this parable, I see Jesus asking us to remember that we, as God's people, cannot be whole, cannot be full, cannot live into our potential, if we do not do the hard work of preparing a world where our neighbors can thrive too, can also be equipped and prepared to receive all of God's provisions of love, and joy, and hope!

That means we have to ask:

What prevents our neighbors from securing the things they need?

What role, intentionally or unintentionally, do we have in preventing our neighbors from accessing their needs?

What are we gonna do to make sure God's is a door that swings open instead of slamming shut?

I think we can start by hearing our text as a parable, and allowing its words to provoke a new understanding of our neighbors:

Five women, the world called them foolish, arrived with minimum provisions. Five more women, the world called them wise, arrived with surplus.

One foolish woman stood in line on election day for twelve hours; she chose to vote rather than to earn her daily wage, and she could only afford one bottle of oil. Her wise counterpart lived in the suburbs, and she voted in fifteen minutes, and stopped by Walgreen's on her lunchbreak. And of course, she has a job with paid time off, so she could always just take a personal day.

One foolish woman took the bus; she had enough money for one bottle of oil, and one bus ticket; she thought it better to be prompt than to have extra oil; the irony is, if she'd have been late, she wouldn't have needed extra oil. Her counterpart had a car, and a Costco membership, so she didn't need to worry.

One foolish woman was young; this was the first feast she'd even been invited to, and she didn't know the protocol; the wiser, more experienced woman beside her could have easily been a mentor, but there's only so much joy to go around. And besides, sometimes tough love is a good lesson.

One foolish woman had the audacity to be from Samaria; she actually found a dealer of oil in the middle of the night, but he wouldn't sell it to her kind; Her wise

counterpart had the good sense to be born in a proper neighborhood, so she had her choice of vendors.

One foolish woman lived in an abusive household; Her daddy threatened that if she didn't make a good appearance at this party, he'd beat her to within an inch of her life; she was too traumatized to think about packing extra oil; Her wise counterpart was smart enough to have a loving and supportive set of parents who reminded her to bring extra oil just in case.

Friends, the kingdom of heaven is not about being wise or foolish, prepared or unprepared. It's about acknowledging the complete audacity, and the complete foolishness of believing that our wisdom, or significance, or value in the eyes of God is connected in any way, shape, or form to earthly privilege.

We're completing an agonizing election season. And even in the best of circumstances, we will be creating a world where every bridesmaid has the opportunity to attend the party. The allegory is short-sighted enough to tell us that's our highest potential. The parable says, God's in-breaking realm is not content with opportunity; God's in-breaking realm is only content with a world where every bridesmaid is known, and welcomed, and seated at God's table. And where every bridesmaid, has a name, and descriptor that far more insightful, accurate, and valuable than wise or foolish: Child of God.

Good friends, may we stop allowing allegory to make us content with worldly justice, and start allowing parable to provoke us into working for God's justice.

May it be so. And may it be soon! Amen.