

“There’s Going to be a Wedding”
Matthew 25:1-13

With this brilliant parable Jesus begins to get his disciples thinking about the end times. For us that’s a signal that the holidays are near. Already there’s an excitement and anticipation in the air; Advent and Christmas are not far off. Bob wants to talk about putting up the Christmas tree. But there’s serious stuff to consider first.

Marriage Customs of the Bible

Even a casual reading of this parable tells us that the customs and laws surrounding marriage have changed, and do change according to culture and with the passing of time. I say this just as an observation. The Bible does not give us hard and fast laws for this sort of thing; it just gives us glimpses as to how it was done on a few occasions.

- The patriarchs practiced polygamy—so too Israel’s kings. Solomon’s harem numbered in the hundreds. Many of these were political marriages that came with treaties attached.
- You might scratch your head when it comes to Jacob who woke up after his wedding night to discover he had married the wrong the sister. He eventually got the one he loved, but he had to work off what he owed their father. That man was not going to let two perfectly healthy members of his family run off without any reimbursement.
- When we get to Ruth her mother-in-law helped her to navigate the delicate marriage customs that pertained to a widow in Israel. If she wanted Boaz, Ruth needed tell him so. She did that by sleeping with (next to) him on the thrashing floor.
- By the time of Jesus, the gospels use the language of betrothal and bride price. Mary and Joseph were legally married, but they had not yet moved in together—an awkward formality but not insurmountable, except Joseph was not the father of the child she was carrying. But as you know, he accepted responsibility for it.
- In John it appears that the whole village turned out for a wedding. There was dancing and food, and they consumed a lot of wine. Jesus was at that party and contributed to the merry making with his first miracle, 180 gallons of fine wine.

- Notice that here in Matthew it's not the bride that we're all waiting for—it's the groom! He's late. The party can't start until he arrives. It's midnight, so what? His bride is wondering where he could be.

Customs change.

Even in the last decade our attitudes toward dating and marriage have changed significantly. And the laws of our land have evolved to reflect society's changing feelings on the subject. Youths don't want mom and dad meddling in their private affairs. And parents have gotten that message, they no longer arrange marriages for their children—at least not in the west.

In our day it is not unusual for a young lady to graduate college, get an apartment and have a life of own before marrying. Once that was unthinkable. She'll find her own boyfriend. It may be a few years before there's a wedding. She might be a little older when the time comes. Rather than asking permission the young couple usually just announces their plans to the family. You all have stories, variations on this theme. There is no longer one right way to do it. Has there ever been?

The Five Foolish Virgins

The customs Jesus cites in this parable, surprise no one. They didn't need an explanation. What caused some wonder is that “the Kingdom of heaven *shall be* (is) compared to the ten maidens waiting for the bridegroom.” It was their job to be dressed and ready. Ready means that their lamps (torches?) lit. When the groom arrives they will parade with him to the home of the bride's family. There he will claim his bride. Remember, the legalities are already complete. He's coming now to claim his wife and take her to their home. And the feast could begin.

You know what happened. For unexplained reasons the groom was delayed. Perhaps his camel got a flat? The maidens dozed off and some of them were caught unprepared when the announcement was made. By the time they procured the necessary oil the procession had passed. The bride and groom were enjoying their feast and the door was shut.

Banging on the door, “we want to join you,” they plead. The Lord (the groom) responds, “I don't know you. You didn't join in the procession to my father-in-law's house, you didn't light our path to the feast.” I was reminded of those who show up for the reception and not the church service.

I once did a wedding for a young lady who only sent invitations to the wedding at the church. The location of the feast was a guarded secret,

announced after the service was concluded. When asked about this she responded, both she and husband felt strongly, “if you were too busy to pray for them and witness their vows, then you were too busy to eat and dance at their reception.”

The point of the parable, we are watchers. Be ready and dressed, with your lamps lit. Yes, dressed. There’s another wedding parable about in which the guests’ clothing plays a part (Matthew 22), The Lord Jesus comes, he is our groom, the Church is his bride. And he will come. Like the delayed groom our Lord Jesus returns at an unexpected hour.

These colorful parables must have made a deep impression on the early Church. Not once or twice, but four times (if not more) references akin to these appear in New Testament. And there are variants too. Rather than a delayed groom, Paul refers to Jesus as “a thief.” “...you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” I Thess. 5:2. (C. f. Rev 16:15, Matthew 24:43, 2 Peter 3:10)

What Does This All Mean?

- A. The day of the Lord is cast as a feast, a wedding banquet, with all that it implies. We find this language in the formal liturgy of the church; the Lord’s Supper is “the marriage supper of the Lamb,” and “a foretaste of the feast to come.” Weddings are about wine, women, song and dance, merry making. Who doesn’t want to attend such a gala? The day of the Lord is to be eagerly sought and anticipated with joy, not fear and dread.
- B. Weddings are well planned events. It is unusual that in the parable the groom should be so late. 2 Peter 3 answers this concern. God does not share our human preoccupation with time: years, months, days and hours. With God a thousand years are like a day to us (2 Pe. 3:8). Nor is he slow in keeping his promise. For your sakes God is being patient in wrapping things up, he wants all to have a chance at salvation. But eventually the day comes. Christ will come in power and glory with his angels, and like a thief, suddenly, without warning. (2 Pe. 3:9-10)
- C. For you and me to be ready means that we have *gratefully* received the good news, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We not only know what he taught, but we know about his life, death and resurrection. It’s one thing to know about them, it’s another to believe them.

Believing comes easy to some, not so easy to others. God gives us the Holy Spirit to help with the believing. What can you do? Use your Portals of Prayer as a starting point for your prayer life. You are free to use other devotionals, but POP have a long history in our church body. They are daily, brief devotionals, meant to get you started in prayer: **started**.

Prayer should go hand in hand with Bible reading. Take your time, you don't have to read the whole book in a year. Pray about what you read, wrestle with the text and with what God may be asking you to do. Some keep a journal, others ask their pastor or a trusted friend about Bible passages hard to understand.

And finally, **do!** Put what you read and pray about into practice. Forgive those who have hurt you. Be charitable. Love those who are hard to love. Tell family, neighbors and friends about God, about your faith in Jesus. And certainly, look forward to "the resurrection of the body and life in the world to come."

Amen

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