

- 1) The story line itself is clear enough, don't you think: The wise get in, the foolish don't.
But what does Matthew's Jesus mean for his listeners to MAKE of this story?
Perhaps the parable is an Aesop's Fable, solemnly recounted in a religious tone of voice.
The wise were ready, the foolish were not—And the Moral of the story is BE PREPARED.
But we didn't really need Jesus to remind us that we need to plan ahead, now did we?
Folk tales aplenty warn us well enough.
And if we're not into folk tales—there's the Boy Scouts.
They do their motto: *Be Prepared* especially well—soon for girls as well as guys.
And they offer behavioral reinforcement with merit badges.
- 2) But maybe this parable of wise and foolish bridesmaids isn't meant as a fable but as allegory.
Each character, event, or object in the everyday world serving as a symbolic stand in—
a religious code designator for something more Spiritually Significant:
*The wise are the righteous, the foolish the sinful, Jesus the bridegroom,
the faith or good works of the righteous the oil,
the shut door eternal rejection beyond hope of salvation.*
Pretty scary, or very reassuring, depending on which you think you are.
But as a lens for seeing, interpreting, understanding the world—
just a tad simplistic, wouldn't you say?
And not nearly as practical as what you can learn from the Scouts.
- 3) Both Aesop's Fable and Allegory takes on these ten wedding attendants have this in common:
they keep the story meaning on a very short leash—But that's a problem, isn't it?
Storyteller Jesus almost never DOES that—
especially when you listen to all the entries in his large anthology of stories.
He seldom ties things down; rather, He does his best, with some success, to open things up wide.
To help us see the same old world with fresh new eyes.
To help us see a world that can seem predictable and flat,
as a world of many dimensions—teeming with surprise and challenge.
To help us see a black and white world as a kaleidoscopic dance of colors.
Both Aesop's Fable and Allegory interpretations of this Jesus story
seem to drain the story world of color—to press its contours flat—
to make the story sound like one we already know, but might well wish we didn't.
I'm guessing—aren't you—that Jesus won't be constrained
by his Aesop's Fable, or Allegory interpretation handlers.

4) So what IS the story about? Well, He TELLS us what in four short words: *The Kingdom of Heaven*. Which is NOT—as Matthew understands Jesus—the world to which we go when we die.

It is, rather, the Reign, the Rule, the “Kingdom”—the “Commonwealth” of God.

What already exists as God’s dream for the world.

A dream that, through the words and works of Jesus and his followers,
is at once already here, but not fully here yet—

a world in the making and on its way—now glimpsed, now lost sight of—

mightily resisted by the self-absorbed, but persistently advancing nonetheless.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has been sending up one Kingdom of Heaven flare after another—
a dazzling fireworks display, going off in all directions:

*The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, a weed and wheat mixture,
a field-buried treasure, a perfect pearl, a net full of fish good and bad.*

And now, The Kingdom of Heaven, God’s Oncoming Commonwealth, is like a wedding feast—
a celebration that some manage to be ready for, and thus get to be part of;
and that some DON’T manage to be ready for, and therefore miss out on.

That said, it should be noted that there is, in this story, a curious twist.

At first it seems to be about who’s brought enough oil and who has not.

But then, at the end, the admonition attached is about staying awake—being on the alert—
when all ten attendants, wise and foolish alike, just couldn’t keep their eyes open.

(So if this IS an Aesop’s Fable, its moral has somehow gotten lost from its cautionary tale.)

5) So—for a moment, let’s consider what it’s like to get ready for a wedding—
any wedding in any time or place.

If there were no promise of a wedding on the horizon,
there would be no sense at all in making any preparations for it.

Whatever it is that one might be doing it wouldn’t BE “wedding preparations,” would it?

On the other hand—I can imagine a bride and groom-to-be so totally absorbed
in the vision of their wedding

that they didn’t undertake all the tasks required to pull off the event.

Or who are so engaged with the romantic idea of their marriage

that they end up neglecting the necessary day-to-day work
of continuing to grow their relationship with each other.

There is an adjective to describe a couple so fantasy-focused—the word is FOOLISH.

6) Let’s try to put this another way:

ATTENTION and DISTRACTION seem to be at opposite ends of the PERCEPTION spectrum.

If we are attentive, we aren’t being distracted; if we’re distracted, we’re not attentive.

That is sometimes true—if we just sort of “zone out,” for instance.

But there is another kind of distraction—one harder to recognize as such—the kind that comes from being so engaged, so absorbed, so fixated on an ideal objective that we fail to pay sufficient attention to steps we need to take to get from here to there.

That's the problem with the "foolish" wedding attendants, I suspect.

Not that they couldn't stay awake 24/7 (nobody did, and nobody can).

The foolish weren't alert to—awake to—what was a critical element of their own role in the drama—a drama that was far, far larger than they were.

When crunch time came—they couldn't let shine the light that was theirs alone to lift aloft.

And I have a hunch that this was not, for the foolish, a solitary attention lapse.

When they come back late with oil and bang on the door,
the bridegroom says: *I don't know you at all.*

For all I know, you are wedding banquet crashers who have never done a thing to prepare for a party you only envision in the abstract.

The interesting thing about attention is this:

It's not simply a matter of passive reception—it's also a matter of active intention.

The more that we see that we need to attend to, the more we set about attending to it.

And the more set about attending to what we already see,
the more our attention reveals to our vision.

Or, as in the case of the foolish wedding attendants—NOT.

What we think we see ever so clearly can keep us from seeing what we really need to see.

Our vision distracted by the very fixation of our focus.

- 7) I can clearly envision the Kingdom, the Commonwealth of God as a theological concept, an eschatological ideal—present already, yet not fully revealed—
a wedding, as it were, in extended process (as ancient weddings were, in fact).

(And here's proof that I do: Hey, I'm talking about it as I speak!)

The haunting question this parable poses for me, however, is this:

How might my very focus on that Kingdom of God vision—my own version of it—

How might that focus serve as a distraction from how I should be more immediately focused on participating in God's Commonwealth/Kingdom Celebration process right here, right now?

Or, alternatively: what is it in the unremitting sensory onslaughts of consumer culture, media messaging, the agitation of political polarization, contradicting "fake news" claims—
what totally absorbs my attention, and thus totally distracts my attention?

What, of the Kingdom of Heaven, of God's Oncoming Commonwealth,
have I missed out on already—even though it's ongoing under my nose?

What Christ-like light is my responsibility—mine particularly—to keep well-tended?

What role in the unfolding, oncoming Banquet of God might we all yet undertake
but could still be self-locked out of—not as a punishment or a penalty—but as a pity.

Because, if we don't do what it takes, one step at a time,
to get ready for sharing in God's Kingdom celebration—
well, we just don't get to be a part of it.

What a pity THAT would be!

The good news is that, this is one utterly avoidable pity.

What does, what might, what can, what will the Kingdom of Heaven look like?

Pay attention! Says Jesus the Storyteller. Be alert! Keep awake!

*And, as you wait and work for God's Oncoming Commonwealth,
help each other pay attention.*