Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

Brian Mattson - 11/08/2026

After All Saints' Sunday, and before Advent begins on November 29, we had a few weeks in our worship planning document that were standalones. Not part of a particular series. No key events in the life of the Church we needed to lift. Just a few normal Sundays in November. So for this first one, I decided to use the lectionary to source scripture and topics.

Lectionary is one of those church words we use on occasion, and it doesn't really serve any purpose other than in the church world. If you've never heard this word, here's the basic definition. A lectionary is a book or list of scripture passages to be read on specific days. The practice goes all the way back to the Early Church when the first Christian communities adopted the Jewish practice of reading scripture on the Sabbath. As time went on, these communities added excerpts from New Testament Epistles and the Gospels. These lectionaries developed over centuries to provide structure and a logical, sequential order to scripture readings in worship settings.

In 1965, following the Second Vatican Council, the lectionary was revised to follow a three-year cycle. These are known as Years A, B, and C, which pull from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke respectively. The Gospel of John is used in all three years during the Easter season. There are normally four readings every Sunday: one each from the Old Testament, Psalms, an Epistle or Revelation, and a Gospel. After the Vatican Council, many

Protestant denominations updated their lectionary readings as well, and today most use the Revised Common Lectionary.

So that's what I'm doing. I'm using the lectionary, although it's not my normal practice. Many traditional mainline churches follow the lectionary readings in their structured liturgical settings. I live near Central Christian Church and they always put the sermon title and whichever scripture they are using on the marquee sign. You've probably seen something similar on church signs around our area or around the country, and you may have wondered how that church or pastor picked the scripture. Well the secret's out. It's probably from the lectionary. And using the lectionary is not some sort of lazy excuse. It can serve very beautiful and powerful purposes.

First, if a congregation follows the lectionary's three year cycle, it will have covered a vast amount of the Bible, including almost the entirety of the Gospels and more than half of the rest of the New Testament. And many of these readings were chosen as some of the most important stories that also help connect the Old and New Testaments as one story of God's mighty acts of salvation.

Using the lectionary as a guide also connects the congregation to the seasons of the Church—Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and so on—providing depth and richness of the liturgical calendar. Not only connecting us to the rhythms, but it also connects us ecumenically. The lectionary is used by multiple denominations, so on any one Sunday, millions of Christians around the world might be hearing and studying the same Bible stories.

And lastly, it prevents pastors from being gimmicky or too topical all the time, while conversely making it hard to avoid difficult passages. I will be honest that there are some stories I would like to steer clear of. Sometimes—and I think most of us understand this—the Bible has some unpleasant parts that we would rather not talk about, partly because we have no frame of

reference for the culture or customs, or because the words can be a little scary, confusing, and judgmental. Today's gospel lesson is one of those.

> **"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten young women took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those young women got up and trimmed their lamps.**
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> **The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet, and the door was shut. Later the other young women came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.**
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> **- Matthew 25:1-13**

This passage is known as the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, among other names, and it has been interpreted and re-interpreted for generations. It's part of a longer section of Jesus' final teaching that attempts to answer this question from his disciples early in Matthew 24:

> **When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"**
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> **- Matthew 24:3**

They want to know when Jesus will come again. What will signal the "end of the age" for the disciples? I suppose if you are going to pose a question to Jesus, that's as good as any, right? There's no denying the eschatological nature of scripture. That's another one of those big church-words. Eschatology is the branch of theology that studies and ponders the end of it all. The Second Coming of Jesus and the ultimate destiny of humankind. We can't escape those "end times" passages in the Bible. From the Old Testament prophets, to Jesus, and even the New Testament apostles, what happens at the end of this age is of great significance and consternation. *We* aren't removed from that same worry, anxiety, fear, and questions around what happens at the end, and neither were Jesus' disciples. That's why they posed the question. They wanted to be prepared. *What are the signs that will let us know the end is near, Jesus?*

To answer their question, Jesus does one of those things he does a lot. He tells stories. After launching into an alarming description of the end days, he offers four parables all tied to the same themes: stay awake, be alert, get prepared. Our scripture lesson about the ten bridesmaids is the second of those parables.

As I said earlier, this is not one of those passages I would select on my own, but sometimes we need to be prodded into uncomfortable Bible study. Because when we are willing to spend a little extra time with the text, to get a sense of its context and deeper meanings, maybe it isn't so "scary" after all. If you simply read these words and try to decipher its plain text reading, you might come away with some unfavorable understandings.

One could quite easily infer from the text that Jesus is making a point about us—the bridesmaids—making sure we are ready to greet the groom—Jesus—whenever he makes his appearance. And because we don't know when that appearance will occur, we had better keep enough oil on hand that Jesus will be able to see our lamps burning at all times. It could be awhile, and there might not be enough oil to go around, so don't share what

you have. Let other people figure out what to do in a crisis, you just take care of yourself. This comes across as selfish—a clear no-no in the Kingdom of Heaven. Sharing and giving our resources freely seems to be a fundamental aspect of following Jesus. Finally, the closing verses of this passage leave an unpleasant taste in our mouths. There is an air of fear and judgment to this being left in the dark, outside of the wedding feast. Outside of the love of God. Perhaps this story, like so many others, deserves further attention.

Pastors and theologians have wrestled with this passage and the other closely related parables for a long time. Looking for deeper meaning in the words of scripture is a time-honored tradition of the church. In fact, it's a necessity. How many times did Jesus and Paul relate the idea that the end was coming soon; that some listening to the words would witness it happen in their generation. But as years passed by, followers of Jesus had to come to new conclusions, or better yet, be willing to live in the tension of not knowing.

As people have wondered about this passage, opinions and interpretations varied. Many claimed these words were direct quotations from Jesus. Others think it was a formulation of the Early Church who were expecting Jesus to return quickly, but after a few generations, were trying to make sense of the delay. Some people put this in the category of parable, while others argue it's allegory where every detail symbolizes something in the real world. All of that to say these 13 verses are why studying the Bible and wrestling with the words is just as relevant as ever. This week in my research, I read several commentaries on the passage, dissecting its words and meanings.

Is it about wedding customs of ancient Palestine and what we can learn from them? While that would be helpful for the original audience, we are so far removed from that time and place, it is not as relevant for us today. Is this simply another critique of the Jewish elites in Jesus' time who were set apart from the beginning, chosen and close to God, yet they still missed the Messiah in their midst? That's certainly one way to understand this parable,

though it's less meaningful for us. The most common stumbling block with this story is what exactly does the oil represent? Surely it's not possessions or wealth, status or power. Those things can either be shared or used to lift others up, a clear command from the Old Testament and throughout the New Testament.

The most common interpretation of the extra oil is that it represents good works. You can't share your hours of service or good deeds as credit for other people. Perhaps that's why the five wise bridesmaids wouldn't or couldn't share their extra "oil" with the others. I can certainly see that as a strong case for the deeper meaning of the oil. One cannot quickly fill a lamp with "good works" or the character of a Christian. Those things are built up over time through careful practice. Secondly, you cannot borrow them from others who have been tirelessly working at following Jesus for a lifetime. That is a journey for each individual to take. A deep relationship is formed through trust and familiarity. Still, if we simply understand this parable as the importance of good works, we might have the tendency to equate what we do, and how often we do it, with the measure of God's approval. Assurance. Salvation. But that understanding hints at the idea that if you just do enough good for your fellow man, all is well, which is not a complete understanding of what Jesus is asking us to do.

Surely there is truth in all of these interpretations. I'm not one to fully endorse the idea that the meaning of scripture changes as we change, but there is a truth to the idea that scripture reads us. It is an active participant, helping shape and mold our faith. It provides fuel for our good works, and depth to our relationships, and those things are what actually make us alive—keep us awake, if we use Jesus' language.

Maybe this whole parable is an encouragement to engage in the joy of *living*. Stay awake, Jesus says. The Kingdom of Heaven is like this—being fully alive. Methodist Pastor, Derek Weber, says this parable is about presence.

Waiting for a presence, to be sure, but also being present in the life of waiting. Pay attention to what is happening around you, in you, and to you.

- Rev. Dr. Derek Weber

The things that are happening around me. In me. To me. Am I present for these things, or am I always looking ahead? *25 more years and I'll be retired. That's when I get to enjoy life.* That can be a trap, if I'm not careful, because it means what I'm doing now is only in preparation for what's ahead. It lessens the importance of what I'm doing today. This year. This season.

My phone buzzed at me on Monday. It wanted to show me a picture from three years ago on Halloween. Jack and Dorothy on our front steps as two lions from Lion King. It was one of those special nights that I want to remember. But when I clicked on the link to look at other pictures from that time, there were a lot of regular photos. Nights on the couch watching movies, or basketball practice, or important art pieces the kids made at school. Normal, everyday life that I captured a picture of, but were unimportant in the grand scheme of things. That's the thing about life, though. We remember some very big, momentous parts about it—weddings, births, vacations, deaths—but most of the time, it's filled with normalcy. But normal, insignificant, inconsequential moments are where the marrow of life is located. The problem is we don't realize it until it has passed us by. This passage of scripture is all about being present right here, right now.

Remember, this parable is answering the disciples' question about what the end will look like, and Jesus tells them no one knows—not even him—so stay awake. That's the same message that ties all of the other parables in this section together. Be alive now. Yes, the end of the days, the Second Coming will arrive at some point in the future, but right now is still of great importance. We know the Kingdom of Heaven has come near in the disciples' time—and with us today—so we are to be active participants. Preparing ourselves and others to enter into that Kingdom. Jesus tells them not to

spend all their time looking for signs, but to be the signs. Embody the faith, character, and good work of Jesus now *and* in the not-yet.

How boring would life be if we simply believe we have it all figured out already? We are expectant people, hopeful for the future, but active in the present. And more than simply awake, *filled* with life. We are in the wedding party and we are going to a feast. True, we don't know when the bridegroom is going to arrive, but we take part in the planning, preparing, waiting, and celebrating.

And I celebrate with you all, and with millions around the world who are diving into this exact scripture passage using the lectionary as our guide. It ties us together ecumenically—the Church Universal—though we won't all come to the same conclusions, or agree on the same eschatology. Some will refuse to look at scripture allegorically, and some will refuse to accept it as literal. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are being challenged to stay awake. Do not become a passive participant, but actively engage in the world now, and in the time to come. It's okay to wrestle with these ancient words. It's okay to come to new understandings. It's even okay to see more than one meaning behind the words and stories. Scripture is alive if you give it a little space to breathe. Jesus is calling you, as well, to take a breath and become fully alive.