

## Matthew 25:1-13

Nadia Bolz-Weber has a brilliant sermon on this scripture, in which she goes an entirely different direction than I'm going to go, but I have to a) commend it to you and b) quote the first paragraph:

It feels like Jesus is saying the Kingdom of God is like a bad dream where I'm supposed to go pick someone important up from the airport like . . . Dolly Parton, but I forget to fill my gas tank and then I'm idling outside baggage claim for so long I doze off and then when Dolly Parton finally texts she's almost there, my car starts beeping that it's nearly out of gas *but* then I realize the dude in front of me has a gas can strapped in the back of his monster truck and I ask if he can help me out but he just points to the overpriced gas station outside the airport and in a panic I use the fumes in my tank to get there but then when I'm filling up my Subaru I see Dolly Parton drive off in the passenger side of the dude's F150 and she doesn't even return my wave - like she doesn't even know me.

So stay alert. The kingdom of God is like that.<sup>i</sup>

Nadia's take on this parable is that the foolish bridesmaids' mistake was in listening to the wise bridesmaids instead of relying on the grace and goodness of the bridegroom to let them come along with the party. I'm not sure she's wrong, but I sort of want to embrace the prickliness of this parable, the difficulty and contrariness of it, and see what happens.

Because it *is* contrary and prickly. Doesn't Jesus also teach us to share with others, to give away one cloak if we have two, not to begrudge the workers who came late to the vineyard and got paid the same as us? Why all of a sudden are the bridesmaids who refuse to share their oil "wise"? What's up with this bridegroom coming so late that everyone's fallen asleep, and not even apologizing for wasting their time or being understanding about how some people might have used up their oil waiting for *him*, and gone off to get more, which can't be easy after midnight? This is harsh.

Taking this parable as it is, without massaging it or rationalizing it, it seems that the

following propositions are true in the world of the story:

- 1) The bridesmaids have some kind of obligation to make the wedding run smoothly, some obligation more weighty than that of a regular guest.
- 2) The lamp oil can't be shared. If you give half your oil to someone else, neither lamp will stay lit long enough.
- 3) The schedule of events is out of the bridesmaids' control and even beyond their knowing. It's like being on a tour, where you know that if *you're* late to the meeting place, the tour bus may just leave without you, but you may also be on time to the meeting place and the tour bus is running late and isn't there yet. It's not fair; it's just the way it is.

That's how the world of the parable is structured. Those are the parameters, like it or not. And quite frankly, we have experience in accepting parameters like that. There's this transition we all make (with varying success) in early adulthood when we realize that we really should come prepared rather than relying on the grownups to have tissues, Advil, a working vehicle. I realized this on the way home from a work camp with my youth group in Kansas when, as rain poured down and Tom held a flashlight on the dashboard so he could see how fast he was driving because our dash light didn't work, one of the kids in the back seat commented wonderingly on how deep the water had gotten on the floor. Because the wheel wells on our 1971 Ford Torino were rusted out. And I realized that if I was going to drive other people's children around at night in remote areas of Kansas, I should probably make sure I was driving a more robust vehicle. It wasn't just me any more, and if I couldn't afford a better car, I had better figure out how to borrow one or otherwise give a higher priority to the safety and comfort of my passengers. I had to be the grownup. I would not say to Dolly Parton, "Here,

come get into my sad car so I can give you a ride, and also please wait while I fill up the tank because I didn't do it before I came to get you." I would have more respect for her than that.

It is also the case that at a certain point nobody else will take responsibility for daily toothbrushing. If we don't figure out a dental hygiene routine we can stick to, our teeth will suffer. Nobody can pick that up for us. And, as I point out to my students, there is only so much I can do to help them learn the material. It is up to them to do the work, whatever it may be, of learning, or it just won't happen.

At the end of this parable, when the foolish bridesmaids show up late to the wedding, the bridegroom says to them, "I don't know you." Which seems harsh. Interestingly, there is a parallel to this earlier in Matthew, in chapter 7:

'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."

As before in Matthew's gospel, there are people who are initially insiders who become outsiders. Something shifts. These people did "deeds of power" in Jesus' name, but didn't do the will of his Father in heaven. They did showy, public-facing things, but they don't mention having taken care that their own interior souls were being transformed or enlightened. They don't say, "I read books with other disciples and discussed how we could learn and grow," or "I prayed every day for 20 minutes," or "I tried to process my failures with insight and humility."

I think this parable is addressed to individuals. This is about paying attention to our own spiritual conditions. Not everything can be shared; some things are up to us. BUT this is always in the context of community! Part of the reason Jesus calls us to tend to others is that it should

be transformative of *us*! As Confucius said, it is only through helping one's family, society, and the world as a whole to attain complete tranquility that one's own virtue can rest in perfect goodness.) It is *in* clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, comforting those who mourn, that we should be listening, learning, praying, and becoming more authentically the persons that God intends us to be! Or, to put it another way, we do need to share our material oil, as part of the way we conserve or build up our spiritual oil!

And one step further: although the community cannot and should not do for me what properly belongs to my own self, it *is* the role of the community to support each other in our efforts. Being part of a community in which other people read and talk about ideas supports me to be serious about reading and talking about ideas. Being in a community where people are patient and forbearing with others helps me persist and take seriously the value of becoming more patient and forbearing. What makes it normal and easy for me to keep enough oil in my lamp is being around people who are all trying to keep enough oil in their lamps, where there is a community expectation that we want to learn to be brave, generous, kind, *and* authentically ourselves.

I notice that in the parable, both the wise and the foolish bridesmaids fell asleep waiting for the bridegroom. There doesn't seem to have been any shame in that, in being human and succumbing to the needs of our bodies when the night drags on. Nobody had to be hypervigilant or superhuman. It was just that when the bridegroom did show up, you were supposed to be ready to go. So I would take from that again, the expectation that we are real, we are not striving for some kind of inhuman level of purity or godliness, not staying up for days at a time and abusing ourselves as if that were especially faithful. We're supposed to be normal,

listen to our bodies, stay off your feet if you sprain an ankle, take a mental health break when you need it. But also live as if the bridegroom could show up any time. Cultivate your soul. When you want to run someone over with your car, breathe. When you want to run and hide, ask yourself why. Curate some helpful mental images to summon up when you need grounding. Those are the ways we can keep oil in our lamps and let our light shine so all the world can see the glory of God.

God of holy anticipation, you have promised that you would return at a time unknown to us. Make us ready, so that when you return we might be welcomed into your kingdom with open arms. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/listening-to-snakes-and-bridesmaids>