

The Wise and the Foolish

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Will you pray with me?

Generous God, help us to find wisdom in patience and virtue in trust as we carry our lamps to shine forth the light of your Son, Jesus Christ. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

An old Scot calls his son in London the day before Christmas Eve and says, "I hate to ruin your day, but I have to tell you that your mother and I are divorcing; forty-five years of misery is enough."

"Dad, what are you talking about?" the son gasps.

"We can't stand the sight of each other any longer" the father says. "We're sick of each other, and I'm sick of talking about this, so you call your sister in Leeds and tell her."

In panic the son calls his sister, who explodes on the phone. "Over my dead body they're getting divorced!" she shouts. "I'll take care of this!"

She calls Scotland immediately, and admonishes her father. "You are NOT getting divorced," she says. "Don't do a single thing until I get there. I'm calling my brother back, and we'll both be there tomorrow. Until then, don't do a thing, DO YOU HEAR ME?" and hangs up.

The old man hangs up his phone and turns to his wife. "Sorted! They're coming for Christmas – and they're paying their own way."

Just like the crafty Scot, sometimes the church on stewardship Sunday can be, well, a little crafty in inviting all of us into community with one another. It is stewardship Sunday. Today we discern and renew our pledges of time, talent, and resources as an act of faithfulness in response to God's faithful generosity. Today we are reminded that there is wisdom in generosity for it is our great and generous God who sent his Son to illuminate God's unfailing hope.

Our parable from Matthew, The Wise and Foolish bridesmaids, is actually the second of a series of four stories where Jesus shares how we are to live until the end of the age. In the time where we are waiting for him to come again. So, our question becomes: how are we supposed to live? What constitutes faithful waiting?

Let's look for some clues.

In Jesus time was customary for a wedding party to gather at the bridesmaid's home and be entertained until the bridegroom arrives. Everyone then would light a lamp or a torch of some kind and go out to meet the groom and then follow the groom back inside for the celebration.

In their long wait all ten bridesmaids grow drowsy and fall asleep. So, any notion that we as a people of faith are to live with some great heightened vigilance or sense of alarm needs to be discarded. Second, all ten bring lamps with oil, meaning, all ten were hedging their bets, anticipating, that the host would take care of all their needs in a great joy filled fest. We should anticipate that the kingdom will be one of abundance. Lastly, all ten knew the identity of the bridegroom- all ten said "Lord, Lord, open to us". So, we cannot even distinguish between the identity of those among who know the bridegroom and those who do not.

And then we have this frustrating interaction between the bridesmaids:

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.

I am troubled by this immediate lack of generosity from the five bridesmaids who came prepared. Couldn't they have just have shared some of their oil? Didn't they have enough?

One theologian says:

If I read this parable aright as it addresses us in our century, there is a grave warning here. Having in other parables been reminded by Jesus that others exclusion is a matter of sorry, not joy, we are now warned that nevertheless some people will exclude themselves, and that those people may be us. The concept...is not one that lodges easily in our current culture. – Ruth Etchells

The idea that somehow, we could exclude ourselves from Christs kingdom, even if only temporarily, is deeply upsetting. This message doesn't sit well with me theologically; Jesus came on behalf of all creation to offer redemption and love. But nowhere does this claim to be an immovable salvific allegory, that is there is no definitive claim the five bridesmaids will forever be shunned from eternity with Christ. But we do learn the main difference between the wise and foolish is being prepared to hold up a lamp, a light, for all to see.

I wonder, are we possibly the foolish ones? Are we somehow unprepared to carry our lamps and participate in the celebration of the living body of Jesus Christ?

The wise and the foolish; can we tell them apart?

What is most important today in being Christ's church is our active fidelity to carry on the light of Jesus Christ. It is our commitment to being prepared to faithfully carry our lamps as long as possible as we wait for Immanuel to gather us together and throw wide open the doors. In this sense, waiting is

not passive; it means staying attentive. It means not living in fear but holding on in trust. Waiting, for us as a church, means being active disciples generously participating in sharing the good news because,

- Jesus Christ comes when faithful people live in vibrant hope and never give up
- Jesus Christ comes when faithful disciples show love and compassion and work for justice
- Jesus Christ comes when hurting people understand they are ultimately healed in God's love
- Heaven breaks into earth when faithful women and men dynamically offer themselves in hope for the work of the kingdom

Quaker Evelyn Sturge spent her lifetime working for women's suffrage and offering humanitarian aid during WW1. She says;

As wisdom dawns with age, we begin to measure our experiences not by what life gives to us, not by the things withheld from us, but by their power to help us grow in spiritual wisdom. – Evelyn Sturge

In our post-Christendom reality, the wise bridesmaids teach us that the entrance into the banquet does not happen based upon what we think we know. Entrance into the banquet cannot be assured by having enough faith, hope, or knowledge. Rather we are invited- in. Invited into hope. Invited into trust. Invited into a grace that has come and yet is still coming. Scriptures wisdom will require a paradigm shift out of our immediate business of transactional giving and getting and orients us towards a richer spiritual reality. The reality that we must keep awake to celebrate and respond to Christ's generous invitation, for we know neither the hour nor the day which it will come.

Many years ago, at the prodding of their sons, a husband and wife considered purchasing a rather run down cabin on a lake. The problem was finances; the couple already had multiple mortgages and the banks would make it very difficult. Convinced it was a wise financial and family

investment, the husband went to his grandmother, Cecil, and asked for a loan. Cecil lived in a small one-bedroom home. The kitchen was so small that the table was more of an end table and only had space for two chairs. She lived on her social security and investment income from \$20,000- her life savings. She budgeted very carefully for her and her two dogs, two finches, and one cat.

At this small table, the grandson offered a better interest rate and monthly payback than she was getting at her bank. Seeing an opportunity to help her family that filled her with joy she said "I am happy to lend you all of it, no problem." She had no further questions. Her grandson took the money, bought the cabin and paid her back.

Would you lend your whole life savings away with such joy? Is this a prudent or wise decision? Would you be a fool- foolish- to so readily move forward in trust?

Well Cecil was my great grandmother, and that is how we acquired our family cabin outside of Park Falls that we now have under conservation easement. This was the beginning of my family calling Wisconsin home. Foolish or not- my grandmother actively played a major role in me preaching from this pulpit- today.

The wise and the foolish; can you tell them apart?

When I consider the people I know who seem most deeply wise, they are people who are oddly full- full of the wisdom of God's grace. They are all attentiveness and generous. There is a sense that they give out of some spiritual fullness, as if the lamps they carry- overflow. And when I am in their presence, I just pray that their excess oil might splash onto me- anointing me, dousing me with the love of God pouring forth through them.

Such is the collective body we know as First Congregational United Church of Christ of Appleton. All of us, together, carry the great lamp of the light of the Word of Life.

This light pours forth through our:

- Outreach ministries and the covenants they have made with partners throughout this valley, the Kerio Valley, and internationally engaged in effort to address hunger, social justice, healthcare, economic justice, indigenous partnerships, mental health, shelter, healthcare, and more
- Children's and youth ministries in laughter and fellowship and service to create a home to grow, deepen, name, and live their faith as they mature
- Music ministries in song and instrument gathered in harmony and chorus to offer praises to God on high and carry us through our time of worship
- Events like the We Are Still Here day to celebrate Indigenous peoples, the alternative gift market, a bilingual Christmas cantata, poinsettia deliveries to our less mobile members
- A committed and talented staff, our extensive network of congregation members managing every aspect of our entire campus, communications, and intergenerational ministries offering a progressive and welcoming home to God's people in the Fox Valley
- Our council that labors over decision making and vision, because they deeply care about you and our mission, and offer their leadership and expertise

The light of Jesus Christ fills this place and pours forth from this place.

DO YOU HEAR ME?

Make no mistake; this church is a lamp unto the Fox Valley. I believe our Our church is so full, so very very full, that God anoints us and others through this community.

DO YOU HEAR ME?

As we gather as a church take seriously your call, like that crafty call from the Scottish father, take seriously the call to come together, to take responsibility to make the journey, out of hope and joy to celebrate! Celebrate the birth of the child who is born again and again every day in our hearts and upon our lips when we offer words and deeds of hope that shine forth HIS light.

Friends, its sorted! The kingdom of heaven will be like this! May we be so generous that we look foolish. May we be so wise as to remain focused in hopefulness. May we be so faithful, as to hold the light of the Lamp of First Congregational up high, for all to see, and may God bless us in our journey, hour to hour and day to day, trusting Jesus Christ comes, the doors are open, and we are united at a table of unimaginable joy in a kingdom which was, is, and is yet to come.

The wise and the foolish; can you tell them apart?

Truly I tell you, I do not know.

Amen.