

### The Ten (Divided) Bridesmaids

I've been thinking a lot about the election this past week, as I'm sure you have. About the sometimes fine line between what we think we know and what we actually don't know. About the painful difficulty of waiting, while the ballots were being counted. About how absolutely divided our nation is. Have you been following the numbers? Of course you have. As of this morning, approximately 49% of Americans (give or take a few percentage points) are celebrating. And approximately the same number are grieving.

And we have to ask: what difference is it really going to make who won the presidency? The Senate and the House are basically in a stalemate, and won't allow any president to do much of anything, for at least the next four years.

It's easy to be disillusioned by the division, and discouraged by the outcome, whatever side of the Red/Blue line you fall on. I'm reminded of the age-old conundrum of whether to view the glass as half full or half empty. I personally tend to see things as half-empty; I always have. But maybe our challenge at this time—or at least my challenge, as your pastor—is to try to view the glass as half-full. Or as Marlin Bartel posed to me when he stopped in at my office this past Friday, “What's the positive that's going to come out of this? That's what we should focus on.” I told him I would do my best.

In case you're wondering, the reason I like to follow the lectionary is that I believe it gives the Holy Spirit the greatest amount of space to guide me in my sermon writing. Sometimes it's almost as if the text chooses me, rather than me choosing the text. And it was that way this past week.

This morning's story of the Ten Bridesmaids is considered by biblical scholars to be not so much a parable as an allegory. In a parable (like “The Lost Coin” or “The Prodigal Son” or “The Good Samaritan”) there is typically one primary lesson to be drawn, one point being made. But in an allegory the listener is invited to make multiple connections, to assign meaning to each part of the story. I ask for your indulgence as I do my best to make some helpful connections between this text and our world.

What first caught my attention about today's lection from Matthew were the numbers. For starters, the number 10. Why ten bridesmaids? Matthew's Jesus could have made the same point with just two: one foolish and the other wise. Why ten? Is it simply because the more there are, the clearer the differences between them become? (Like the record 159 million that voted in this year's election?) I read this past week that the number 10 in the Bible signifies order, completeness, responsibility, law. (Think “The Ten Commandments.” Or think, the Tithes, which is one tenth of one's harvest that we're supposed to give back to God.)

And then I was caught by this number being divided, equally, five to five. Five of the bridesmaids were foolish; five were wise. Five brought extra oil; five did not. Fifty percent made it to the wedding banquet; fifty percent ended up being locked out. Does that sound familiar?

Matthew's Jesus tips us off in verse 1 that what he's really talking about is the kingdom of heaven. That glorious realm in which everything is ordered by the perfect will of God. A realm in which how we live, in this world, is the litmus test for righteousness.

Wedding banquets in first century Palestine were huge parties. (And I'm not talking about political parties!) Parties that you didn't want to miss. Lots of food and drink and dancing and celebration. And so these ten bridesmaids were understandably excited. They had each been specifically chosen by the bride as her special guests, her attendants. (Just as we are all specially chosen.) And apparently one of the privileges of being a bridesmaid was accompanying the groom to the banquet.

The bridegroom at a first century Palestinian wedding would have been the master of the banquet, and therefore the center of attention. Problem was, our bridegroom was unexpectedly and inexplicably delayed. Leaving the ten bridesmaids waiting. Night fell. The bridesmaids became drowsy, and all ten fell asleep. And in the meantime, the lamps or torches they had each brought began to run out of oil.

They should have known, Jesus is implying. They should have known the bridegroom might be late. They should have brought extra oil with them. Five of them, the wise ones, did bring extra oil. But the other five, the foolish ones, didn't. So when the bridegroom finally did come, and all ten bridesmaids woke up, only five of them had extra oil to put in their lamps. Leaving the other five, well, out in the dark.

Biblical scholars seem remarkably united in concluding that the bridegroom is none other than Jesus himself, that Master of the greatest of all parties, the kingdom of heaven (you could say that I am talking politics here). And it was believed that at the end of time Jesus would come again to usher in the kingdom of heaven. But when would that be? Some thought it would be sooner, and some thought it would be later. Those thinking it would be sooner were apparently those five in our allegory who didn't think to bring along extra oil. And those thinking it would (or at least might) be later represent those in our allegory who did.

So the lesson (or at least one of the lessons) in this story is clear. Be prepared. We don't know when Jesus is going to return, we don't know when the kingdom of heaven will finally come. So be prepared. Bring along extra oil. Because it might take a while.

So what do you think the oil might represent in our allegory? Most scholars think it represents good deeds—lives lived in accordance with God's will. In which case another lesson is clear. How we live matters. Live good lives. Perform good deeds. Follow God's will. Because we don't know when Jesus at long last is going to kick off the greatest party of all time.

So what might this have to do with the election, and the hopelessly divided condition of our country? And who, I'm sure you're all wondering, represents the five foolish bridesmaids, and who are the five wise ones?

I'm not going to say. But I will say this. We're still waiting. We're waiting for every last one of the ballots to be counted, in Georgia and North Carolina and Alaska and the other forty-seven states. We're waiting for the election to be finally and safely settled. We're waiting to see if the next four years will be any better or any worse or any different than the last four. We're waiting to see if there will be reason to hope, or only reason to despair. We're waiting to find out which of us will be happy with the election results, and which will be sad. Which five of us will go to the wedding banquet, and which five will miss out.

But will any of us be happy? Aren't we all in a sense losers? The fact is, we are a nation divided, just like those ten bridesmaids. Look at the map of which states voted for which candidates, and then tell me. What reason do we possibly have to hope?

As people of faith, as people of the book, as people of God, here is that reason. We're not waiting for the next or the best or the next best president. We're not waiting for a blue wave or a red wave. We're not waiting for a legislature that can finally get things done.

What we're waiting for is the kingdom of heaven. We don't know when it will come. But that doesn't matter. Because until it does come, and while we are waiting, our job is actually quite clear. Do you want to know what it is? It's called "good deeds." One after another. Built up like treasure in heaven. Because earthly treasure is no treasure at all.

It's called "living according to God's will." And if you're ever uncertain what that looks like, check out the entire Gospel of Matthew. You don't want to miss out on the greatest party of all time, do you? (And no, I'm not talking politics!)

We are a divided nation. That's the bad news. The good news is we have an opportunity to start the work of healing. To reach out beyond our divisions and differences. To build bridges where right now there are chasms. That will give you all kinds of good deeds to add to your list. I'd call that a glass half full!

Amen.

Sing: "We Dream of a Turning" (Purple Songbook #10)