

A tough parable to read right now (Matthew 25:1-13; 32A)

The last are certainly not first in this story.

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“How long, O Lord?” This is the question on which a recent series of sermons at my congregation has focused.

As the world continues to be upended and uncertain, we are left to muddle along as best we can, cycling through brief and bright moments of resilience and hope in between longer slogs of impatience and frustration. We are in a season of waiting, and we don't know exactly how long it will last or what the ending will even look like.

And here, in the midst of such a season, comes this confusing and rather dark parable. Jesus offers an ominous story of a belated wedding feast and the exclusion of the unprepared as a metaphor for our call to expectant waiting on God and the coming kingdom.

The paradigm it suggests seems far from the notions of grace and mercy and inclusion that are so often present in Jesus' teachings. Certainly the last are not first in this story, and that makes it a hard one to wrestle with on a good day in a good season, much less in this pandemic year,

The role of the bridesmaids in welcoming the bridegroom is one that doesn't quite resonate with modern weddings, so that element is largely lost on us. And while the five apparently foolish bridesmaids take the blame in this story, missing out on the banquet as a result, the bridegroom faces no consequences for leaving ten women alone in the night far past his expected arrival time. Not to mention that after

making everyone wait for so long, the bridegroom doesn't even wait long enough for the five oil-deprived bridesmaids to return. Nor do the five wise bridesmaids catch any flack for their lack of generosity toward the others.

Are we meant to conclude then that our invitation to the kingdom of God hinges on hoarding supplies and prioritizing self-preservation over the collective good? Or that God will be careless with our time and how God shows up but exacting about the way we show up? I don't have answers to these questions, and they chafe more than usual right now.

But I wonder if the first mistake is for us to worry about and critique everyone in this story except for those we are meant to identify with and learn from. After all, if we were all wise bridesmaids, what need would any of us even have for such a parable? On the contrary, we are often foolish, so perhaps we'd do well to look there for a lesson to learn.

These bridesmaids are patient and willing, despite being labeled foolish. What leads to their condemnation is that they do not store up for themselves the reserves they need to show up to serve as God calls them to when the time eventually comes. How are we focusing our time, energy, and resources in ways that, despite our present circumstances, will help us to serve God and others when we are called to do so?

Are we giving ourselves rest and care so that we have the energy to care for others? Are we continuing to develop and grow spiritually so that we are ready to do the work when opportunities arise? And how are we helping others store up and prepare as they need to? How can we wait together well?

Even the wise bridesmaids fall asleep. And we all lose focus and wander at times or grow complacent or simply too weary. These things do not render us faithless—so long as we remember what is most important and are prepared to offer it when the time comes.