

Sermon: Going to a Fool's Party

Scripture: Matthew 25:1-13

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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Sometimes my wife, Tracy, and I will talk about the particular scripture that I'm working on for the week in preparation for my sermon. And I shared this one with her on Thursday morning in the kitchen as we were putting our breakfasts together. I reminded her about the parable that she had certainly heard before, of the 10 bridesmaids who are awaiting the groom to arrive for the wedding celebration and 5 of them are wise and 5 of them foolish and how the groom is late and all the bridesmaids fall asleep and how when the groom finally does show up to be ushered into the big party they all jump to their feet and light their lamps for the procession, but only 5 of them had brought back up oil to keep their lamps burning and the 5 who didn't asked the 5 who did if they could have some and the 5 who did said – no, you can't have any, you should go get some – and while the foolish bridesmaids are gone the groom ushers the 5 wise ones into the party, slams the door behind him so when the bridesmaids return with their oil they knock on the door and the groom says from behind the door "I don't know you!"

So I retold it to Tracy and without missing a beat she responded in a way that I should have seen coming but I didn't, she said "I don't like it. I'm with the foolish bridesmaids. We'll go off and have our own party instead of waiting there all desperate for the MAN to allow us the honor of coming into his party. No thank you. He was the late in the first place, forget him!" And I responded as a

husband should – “right, that is exactly what Jesus meant, thank you for the insight, honey.”

Well, we had a good laugh about her response but it did highlight for me how remarkably relevant if not prescient Jesus’ parables often are... because at least while I’m recording this sermon we are still waiting like the anxious bridesmaids for the counting of votes, for the final call on the election... and here we stand divided 50-50 about which boomer white man should lead us forth, half of us wise and half of us fools, and we’re getting all wrapped up and enthralled by one or the other inviting us to their party! Some wise, having played the long game and prepared for the outcome, others foolish, assuming the best and being unprepared for what follows, feeling the party moving on without them, and so on and so forth.

I don’t think that Jesus was prophesying about our 2020 election when he told this parable even though the parallels are a little uncanny. Nor do I think the moral of the story is that the foolish bridesmaids should go off and have their own party... though, I have to say that Jesus’ parables seem intended to disorient, to upend expectations, to surprise or even baffle the listener. So maybe there is something to considering a rather outlandish interpretation, or at least starting there, knowing that most people found Jesus and much of what he said extremely outlandish! And I’m skeptical we’ve figured him out yet, some 2000 years later.

So I take that back, what I said about Tracy’s gut response to the parable, actually let’s start there. On the side of the foolish bridesmaids. Afterall, Paul did say at one point in his letter to the Corinthians – “For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display, at the end of the procession, we’ve been made a spectacle; we are fools for Christ, while you are wise, we are weak while you are

strong, we are dishonored while you are honored!” and elsewhere he said, “the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the sight of God. For He catches the wise in their craftiness.” So there’s some scriptural grounding to think that it all could be exactly the opposite from what we assume is going on.

Let’s think about the foolish and wise bridesmaids. This is one of the last 3 parables that Jesus tells in Matthew before he enters into his passion and death, so he’s about to become... the fool of fools. He’s about to be humiliated, betrayed, abused and executed naked on a cross, though he is wholly innocent and he will lift not a finger nor say a word to defend himself. And all of this after everyone around him has been calling him the Messiah, the one who has come to save the world. Talk about coming across as a fool! And also consider that this parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids comes in chapter 25 of Matthew but in the chapter just preceding it, chapter 24, Jesus is talking about the end of times and he says no one knows, not even me, when the timing will be, so be on guard not to be deceived by those who DO claim to know. And he says “many will come claiming that they are the Messiah, the Holy One of God, they will deceive many as they come in my name. But do not believe it, do not be deceived! Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the Lord will come.”

Then he tells this parable beginning by saying “At that time the Kingdom of Heaven will be like...10 bridesmaids who went out to meet the bridegroom. And there a couple of odd things to note about the parable that make me wonder if Jesus is messing with our heads a bit. The first odd thing to note is what Jesus says the lesson of the parable is - “Stay awake for you know not the day or the hour when the Lord will come.” But ALL the bridesmaids fell asleep. All 10 of them, foolish and wise, failed on that account and did not keep awake, watching. The

second odd thing to note is that the so-called wise bridesmaids were cruel. The foolish bridesmaids when they heard the Bridegroom was almost there asked the wise ones if they would share their oil and the wise ones said “nope this is ours! Just because you weren’t smart enough to bring extra, doesn’t mean that we have to share, nah, nah, nah...” Wise or no, they sure seem to be miserly! And this coming from the mouth of Jesus is odd because so much that has preceded this parable in the Gospel, so many of his teachings and his actions thus far, have encouraged an exact opposite response. Instead he has taught and exemplified an attitude of welcome to the outsiders, of generosity to those who have less, of inclusion for the excluded, uplift for the downtrodden... so you’d think the last thing Jesus would do would be to commend the bridesmaids attitude as wise.

So my question that all of this leads to is this – could the groom, in this parable of Jesus, NOT be the true groom? Could it be that he is the deceiver Jesus warned about, *claiming* he is the Messiah and enticing with a great party, and the wise bridesmaids, greedy as they were, jumped up and follow this imposter saying “goodbye” to their foolish maiden friends? And when the foolish bridesmaids who didn’t bring enough oil banged on the door outside saying let us in the imposter groom says, quite cruelly “I don’t know you!”

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like... that’s all that Jesus says when presenting his parable, the kingdom of heaven will be like this story and then in the very next chapter of Matthew Jesus walks into Jerusalem is betrayed by Judas at the last supper, arrested, condemned, and that chapter ends with Peter in the courtyard being asked if he’s one of Jesus’ followers and Peter says “I swear, I don’t know the man.” The earthly door is shut, so to speak, barring out the kingdom of heaven. “We do not know you!”

It could be a stretch of an interpretation and yet one thing we know about Jesus' parables is that they are supposed to stretch us, to needle at us, to undermine our cozy assumption, to challenge our arrogant certainties. And it would be just like Jesus that just as we feel all smug about our own inclusion and others' exclusion, we learn that we're following an imposter. Or just like him that as we are banging on the door to get let into the party from which we've been excluded, we get a sense of whose company we the excluded are in... namely the true Messiah.

Maybe, just maybe, we come to realize that the party that Tracy is going to with the foolish bridesmaids, is the right party, the party we should all be wanting to go to, the fools party! You know, the one where those who didn't bring enough oil or plan ahead enough are embraced and welcomed by those who did. You know, the fools party where the door is always left open for the late ones and the lost ones and the last ones and the losers and the unprepared. You know, the fools party where the groom is not a hot and powerful superstar calling for all the amazing superstar-y people to come in but a vulnerable, crucified, and forgiving host calling especially those who seem least deserving of being invited to a party.

This is what the kingdom of heaven is like and it's distinctly different from the kingdoms of this world including our own. Maybe we should be wary` about what party we are wanting to get into... Amen.

Welcome and Call to Worship

Hello Members and Friends and Guests of First Congregational Church in Winchester. It is good to have you worshipping with us no matter when you are watching this or wherever you may be. Know that we are never far from one

another and if you need anything during this difficult time, we do hope that you will reach out to myself or any of us on the ministry team. We are happy to pray with you, to problem solve with you, to be in conversation about your spiritual journey, to hear your stress over what's going on in our nation that impacts our most intimate families, to plan a visit with someone, or whatever it may be, we hope you will notice if the Spirit is moving you to reach out and that you will do it, however significant or seeming insignificant the need seems.

We are in the middle of our Stewardship Drive where we ask that people consider pledging to the church for the coming year by filling out a pledge card to say how you can support the work of the church. We've asked a few church members to share what the church means to them and why they give and this Sunday we have Tom and Nancy Church here for a moment of sharing.

Thank you Tom and Nancy and we appreciate the blessing you two are in our church community, serving on the Health and Wellness Ministry and the Facilities Ministry!

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