

Too Good For Heaven

1 Thess 4:13-18

Matt 25:1-13

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South Yarra Community Baptist Church

I was delighted to receive Nathan's invitation to share some reflections on Scripture with you this Sunday. My husband and I had the good fortune to visit Melbourne four years ago for a conference in July and we fell in love with your city. We promised ourselves we would return for a visit during the summer months and how I wish I could be with you in person today. I celebrate your recent release from 111 days in lockdown – as life begins to return to something resembling normal I pray with you for all those suffering illness or isolation, grieving a loss, or enduring economic hardship and especially for our political leaders to find the wisdom and courage to guide us through the difficult months ahead.

As I reflected on today's Gospel reading, I found myself thinking about the values I had received from my family. I come from ethnic, working class roots, was raised Roman Catholic and attended Catholic schools. My mom comes from a coal mining town in Pennsylvania where the men went down the mines and the women worked in the sewing factory. My dad's dad was an Italian immigrant who settled in Newark, New Jersey and made his living as a barber. My people worked hard and lived by what the Good Book said about being good: don't lie or cheat, obey your parents, do your best at school and at work, be generous and kind, love your enemies and be forgiving.

That last one was big in our family. We were quick to quarrel – did I mention we were Italian? – but we were just as quick to forgive. My mom told us about how she learned this lesson the hard way. When she was about 12 she had a best friend who did something that made her angry. She can't quite remember what it was, but at the time Mom decided to stop speaking to this girl to punish her. After a few months, Mom realized that the argument was silly and she wanted to make-up with her friend. But it was too late. The girl could not forgive Mom for being so cold-hearted and my mother, who just turned 90, grieves the loss of that friendship to this day. It was why she always did her best to be "slow to anger, abiding in love and faithfulness" which is how Moses describes God in Exodus (34:6).

When it came to preaching and teaching about today's text, the priests and nuns told us that being good was serious business because it was all about meeting the criteria for getting into heaven. Our reading from Matthew's gospel today begins with the word, "Then" which seems to support a future orientation – be good in this life because your future, eternal happiness depends upon it. But what if we are meant to wonder, "When is the 'then' that this parable is

about?” That question turns out to be the central one around which the meaning of the parable will pivot.

For this is a story about a night of excitement and anticipation. It is the night when the bridegroom will be arriving and 10 bridesmaids have the honor of meeting him on the road to light his way into the city. This was the custom when honored guests arrived in the dark of night and the bridesmaids dutifully go out to meet him on the road. We are told that five of them were wise – they not only took their lamps but they brought flasks of extra oil. But the other five were foolish because they took only their lamps and wouldn't you know it, the bridegroom was delayed and didn't arrive till after midnight. When the lamps of the foolish bridesmaids were going out, they asked the wise bridesmaids for some of their oil, but the wise bridesmaids said “No chance! We didn't bring enough for you, too. Better go and buy some for yourselves.” As the foolish bridesmaids were running frantically around to get oil for their lamps the bridegroom arrived and let the wise ones into the wedding banquet. When the foolish ones arrived, asking to be let in, the bridegroom said, “Truly I do not know you.” And Matthew adds this explanation of the parable from Jesus, “Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

That last bit is what has led to reading this text as a warning: Don't be foolish like the foolish bridesmaids because you might get caught unawares by Christ's second coming and get yourself locked out of heaven. The meaning that dominated preaching and teaching my family heard was: be good or else! The nuns used to tell us that every good deed we did earned us a gold brick on our house in heaven. Really good people would have really big houses, heavenly mansions to enjoy for eternity. For the wicked, the eternal fires of hell would be their punishment.

It wasn't just working-class Catholics who heard sermons like this one. It happened to be my context, but whether Catholic or Protestant, working-class or well-to-do, and whether the preacher had a PhD from Yale Divinity or was a self-appointed street-corner doomsday prophet, the emphasis in Christianity was on the next life, not this one. And the whole enterprise was fraught with risks and obstacles. God was going to come back ready to judge the good from the wicked and if you were judged among the wicked no amount of banging on the heavenly gates would get God to relent.

This still dominates Christian thinking and if that's the concern you bring to this parable, you might come away very unsure about what the path to heaven looks like. One practical lesson about how to avoid eternal hell fire seems to be that like the wise bridesmaids, good people are supposed to anticipate what could go wrong and plan for it. The Boy Scout motto “Be prepared” seems to apply here. Maybe good people are prepared people, but these well-prepared ladies seem to have a nasty edge to them. When asked to share what they have, they sound really

selfish, not kind or forgiving at all. How will that get us into heaven? And what are we supposed to feel for the foolish bridesmaids who find the door shut against them? A bit of “I told you so” or smug superiority? I mean, the groom has no sympathy for them, why should we?

And what about the groom who is often said to represent God? He’s a cold-hearted guy, isn’t he? Not an ounce of kindness or forgiveness in his bones, nothing like what Moses told us God was like. Is Jesus trying to contradict Moses? Is the meaning of this parable that God really isn’t all that into forgiveness? That’s hard to believe, I mean Moses was really important to Jesus and not to mention that would directly contradict everything Jesus taught us about being blessed by God. Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel we get the sermon on the mount, Jesus’ central teaching about who is blessed in God eyes: the meek, the poor in spirit, the merciful, those who mourn, are pure in heart, and are peacemakers. The bridegroom doesn’t sound like a guy who values those things. He let the selfish girls in, no questions asked apparently, and had no compassion for the ones left out of the party.

So where does that leave us? I think it best to read this Scripture with fresh eyes and a good place to start would be to rethink the “Then” that opens the parable. Let’s put aside the idea that it refers to some future time when we will face a merciless judge. With fresh eyes we can ask, “What if this parable is about how we live our lives here and now? What if the ‘Then’ is part of our now?”

It’s easy to see how we might get the idea that this parable is about Jesus’ second coming because it is filled with the bridesmaids’ anticipation of something about to happen. And of course we are asked to read this parable along with 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. This is one of the earliest letters of Paul and he is addressing a concern about whether those who have died will also participate in the new life made possible by Jesus life, death and resurrection. There’s a lot of judgment day imagery in this passage: archangels and trumpets, God descending, the dead rising, and the living ascending into the clouds to meet “the Lord in the air to be with the Lord forever”. The passage ends with Paul saying, “Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

There’s only one way to find encouragement in these words, and that’s if we count ourselves among the chosen who God has come to bring up to heaven. If we are the ones being left behind or left out of heaven, these are harsh words, not encouraging at all. It’s the same with our parable today – if you count yourself among the wise bridesmaids, the good ones who are welcomed by the bridegroom, how few your worries will be. But our parable today is actually a warning about what can happen when we are too confident in our own goodness and that warning becomes more obvious to us when think about why we call Judgment Day the Second Coming of Christ.

It's because the first coming is what we anticipate during Advent and celebrate at Christmas. This coming was not like what we'd expect from a divine being – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob took the form of a child born into a poor, dare I say working-class family, who at the time of his birth was experiencing temporary homelessness. This is surely the kind of God who would value meekness, mercy and a poverty of spirit and material belongings. The popular image we have of God's second coming of a merciless God meting out divine punishment, doesn't quite synch up with the first. As a friend of mine, Robert Hamerton-Kelly, observed in his sermon on this scripture nearly twenty years ago, "We must hold these two advents together if we are to understand what the gospels are saying, namely, that the one who comes to judge is the same as the one who came to die; the baby Jesus does not suddenly change into the barbarian Christ, the one who turns the other cheek does not suddenly become a virtuoso of vengeance."

This agrees with what Jesus says rather pointedly in John's Gospel, "I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world." (John 12:47) So what happens if we approach the text with this assumption, that God has already come into the world not to judge us but to save us?

We begin to see that with this parable Jesus is teaching us about what can go wrong when we focus too much on judgment, when we orient our lives around reaping rewards for ourselves and punishments for those who couldn't quite live up to God's standards as well as we did.

Let's look again at what made the wise bridesmaids so wise. Was it because they were so very well prepared? It may be like this for you, too, but when I tend to overprepare is when I'm the least secure about what's coming up. Boy Scouts recommend being prepared for their camping trips not because they are overconfident in themselves, but because if they are confident about anything it's that anything can happen. There's humility in that preparing, a humble recognition that nature is powerful, unpredictable, and untamable. What if the wise bridesmaids were wise in that way? What if they were humble and a little bit insecure about their own fitness for the wedding feast? It's not that they feared being judged, but rather that they knew how often they fall short trying to follow Jesus. That sits much better with the type of person who would be blessed by God – "blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." What I love about this parable is how Jesus is trying to coax us into seeing that meekness does not mean hiding from the world but engaging in the here and now with humility and a clear sense of purpose.

But why then do the wise bridesmaids not share the oil with their friends? Maybe it has less to do with teaching them a lesson and more to do with the community and friendships that develop among people who are engaged in the preparations together. Like my church community, I'm sure you come together to prepare for events – at least we all did before Covid-19 lockdowns. Gathering in the church kitchen to prepare a meal together or to have meetings to plan for a church retreat or youth event, that time spent together thinking through

the details and making all the preparations is the time that builds bonds which will hold during difficult times like the ones we are in. That is the extra oil you carry with you as you wait in joyful expectation of the bridegroom's presence being made visible in your midst. And the work of accumulating that oil is not something that can be given to others – we each must do that work for ourselves.

If we get too caught up in counting ourselves among the saved, the ones who are truly good and worthy of inclusion in the wedding banquet, we may arrive at the wedding feast to find the door has been locked against us. But hopefully, slowly over time, we may come to see that it is not the bridegroom who has locked us out, but a prideful belief in our own goodness.

This is what happened to my Mom when she punished her friend only to find that the punishment fell most harshly on herself. It is what happens when politics become polarized, something we have seen in American politics leading up to this week's presidential election. Like my mother and her friend, many of us have stopped talking to each other, so convinced are we that we are on the side of all that is good, noble and true. A day of repentance may come, let us pray it does not come too late. There is a judge in this real-life parable, and it is our virtuous selves.

It's mind-blowing to think that what made the bridesmaids foolish was not that they hadn't been good enough to get into heaven, but that they had too strong a belief in their own goodness to engage in the real, flesh and blood work of building community in the here and now. And what made the wise bridesmaids wise was not preparedness, but the willingness to work at the real, flesh and blood relationships that sustain us through good times and bad.

Most foolish of all is to react like the foolish bridesmaids when we discover ourselves to have been too confident in our side being the right side. They ran around trying to find some oil because they didn't trust that the bridegroom would be gracious to them. They did not believe that he would have welcomed them and their unlit lamps as graciously as he did the others. When the bridegroom says I don't recognize you, it sounds cold-hearted but it might be better understood as the response of a gracious Lord who is shocked at how little faith the foolish bridesmaids have in him. "I don't recognize your doubt, your shame, your fear that I will judge you," he is saying. "I would never judge a heart that is learning to let go of their certainty about who God will reward and who God will punish."

We cannot know the future or what will happen to us after death, which is in the hands of our loving and compassionate God and so need not worry us. Which frees us to live with less judgment and more humility in our lives here and now, a pursuit which is its own reward.