

What Five Wise and Five Foolish Bridesmaids Have to Say About Pledge Cards

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Timothy B. Safford

Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 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, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."
Matthew 25:1-13, NRSV

I.

This parable fundamentally contradicts my understanding of the Gospel. The five wise bridesmaids, who in the parable have brought both lamp and lamp oil to escort the bridegroom to his bride ¹, tell the five foolish bridesmaids, who want to borrow some of the wise ones' oil, "No, there will not be enough!"

Not enough! With God's grace, there is always enough. There is room at the table, warm embrace for the sinner and welcome for the outcast. Five loaves feed thousands, with leftovers! The last are first, the meek inherit the earth, tax collectors and prostitutes at the head of the line. What is this, "There is not enough," stuff?

And, at the dramatic end of the parable, when the foolish bridesmaids return to the wedding feast after buying oil, and the party has started but the door is locked, the bridegroom says to them, "I do not know you."

Whoa, just a minute! Certainly God knows me when I stray from the path, make the mistake, fill myself with despair. God celebrates when the lost has been found and that the blind can see. Just like the loving father embraces his lost son who comes home dissolute and oil-less, God will embrace me when I show up late in similar circumstance.

And what's with these five wise bridesmaids who won't share a little oil? Call them the five stingy bridesmaids, and we all know how God feels about stinginess.

II.

I remember flying out to Chicago to attend an ordination, and I asked a friend who was also attending to pick me up. On the way, I realized that I forgot to bring a check to drop in the offering plate, so we pulled over and I extracted a few of those crisp, freshly printed \$20 bills from the ATM.

In church, with the offering plate coming around, as it always does, I got out my crisp \$20 bills, and then I heard whispered from my friend, "I don't have cash; loan me \$20."

¹ Some old manuscripts mention a bride, but the scholars assume that the parable—unique to Matthew—allegorizes the Messiah as the bridegroom. The NRSV takes the liberty of referring to the ten as "bridesmaids," though the KJV and most other versions use "virgins," a direct translation of the greek word *parthenos*, which leads to many other interesting observations (that virgins did escort a bridegroom in a lit procession in Roman custom) which I had in my first sermon, which is why I burned it later. I digress: *bridesmaids* is a great choice of word in this instance.

Hmm. What would Jesus do? With today's parable as the guide, I might've said, "Sorry, there isn't enough. I carefully planned to put these \$20 bills in the plate. Use a check. Oh, don't have a check? I guess you're going to have to run out to the ATM, LIKE I DID, and get some cash. And, if you don't get back before the plate's done going around, you don't get any tea sandwiches, spinach dip or punch in the fellowship hall later. In fact, I am going to act like I don't even know you."

As you can see, I prefer to bring my own conditions to the gospel. I want these ancient texts to listen to me, and not the other way around. Can I get past my absolute notion of what my take on the gospel has to say, so that God's gospel may speak to me anew? The Holy Scriptures are not an instruction manual. They are the opportunity to listen, struggle, ponder, discuss, and in the most profound sense, be invited into dialogue with God. What are we to hear?

III.

In 7th grade, I was not very good about doing my homework, and often turned in assignments incomplete that had been rushed and were rather messy. One teacher, Mr. Hill, was understanding and compassionate, knowing that as my parents were going through a divorce, I had plenty of distractions and hurdles. Other teachers were not. So, I found a way to get their assignments done, but with Mr. Hill's, I took for granted that he would be understanding and compassionate, that he would accept sloppy work, or give me more time to finish an assignment.

And he was, even giving me a passing grade; I have been grateful since. But he did write in his grade report: "Tim has been rather *cavalier*² toward his assignments, trusting in my patience. He may not encounter the same patience in the 8th grade, and beyond."

That's what's happening in this parable. The five foolish bridesmaids are too cavalier. They think it's seventh grade. The wise bridesmaids understand it's eighth grade, and beyond.

IV.

We cannot take the grace of God's inclusive love for granted. To do so is to disrespect its very nature and intention. Yes, God may choose to lavish us with it at any time, but to organize our lives without urgency for the transformational and redemptive meaning of God's saving grace and inclusive love, is hubris that assumes God will always be so patient. The prodigal son, when he wandered home from the far country, got lucky that his father embraced him and celebrated his return. To assume that God will always embrace us in the same way is presumptuous. We've been invited to the wedding feast, and to show up without oil impolite.

The parable also reminds us of the importance of spiritual intentionality, and explodes the spiritual arrogance that there is always more time to get our spiritual house in order. On intentionality, here is a detail about lamp oil: Lamp oil is not easily acquired. Lamp oil is precious and comes dear. You have to plan to have it on hand, and check to make sure you have enough. You can't just pull up to an ATM at a minimart and get some.

Remember the biblical woman who loses one coin of her ten, and then spends two coins of lamp oil to look for it? God is planning to look for you with two coins worth of oil. Can't we be ready with a coin of oil to bring to God's great banquet of our redemption?

² From the OED, *Cavalier*, as adjective: Careless in manner, off-hand, free and easy; haughty, disdainful, supercilious.

V.

The parable has something to say to us about the bold decision that your Stewardship Team, the Vestry and I have made in doing away with pledge cards for the 2015 Operating Budget.

If you're visiting today, and not an Episcopalian, a pledge card is where we "pledge" what we are going to give financially in a coming year.

With some fear and trepidation, yet full of hope that this is the right decision, we are saying, "Pledge cards are for foolish bridesmaids. We are members of this congregation. We know how to pack our oil up with our lamp when we head to the wedding feast. We plan, we're intentional, and we understand what's at stake. Christ Church is not to be taken for granted; there is not more time to become a financial steward of Christ Church. Without equivocation, reservation, without hesitation, we give joyfully to mission and ministry of Christ Church."

It's a risk we're willing to take if you're willing to take it with us.

Pledge cards tend to reduce stewardship to a financial transaction when stewardship is meant to be a spiritual practice that requires planning and intentionality. To pledge once a year suggests that we need to only think about God and our finances once a year, rather than invite God into every hour of every day, every decision, every joy and every struggle. Our giving to Christ Church must reflect how we order our life in response to God. Are we thankful? Are we confident? Are we doubtful? Are we angry with God? Apathetic? Hopeful?

Here is the most frequent concern: If we don't have pledge cards, how can we budget, how will we know how much money we will have? A budget is a plan; doesn't a wise bridesmaid have a plan?

We are trusting that the same 400-plus stewards/bridesmaids who are faithfully contributing \$421,058 to the mission and ministry of Christ Church in 2014 will continue to so in the future. Some will increase; some will have to lower. We'll gain new stewards, and we'll lose some as well. We need to communicate what our mission is and challenge, and yes, cajole, ourselves to do our best, but I am sure we will. Will you?

VI.

Personally, I am relieved to not pledge. But does that mean I am not going to give? Am I not going to respond to God's blessings with both joy and sacrifice? Of course not! To not give to the mission here would be impolite, like showing up to the wedding without oil. We do not know what we'll give, but will invite God into every day, every latte, every choice about cable and clothes. To respond to God in joy through gifts of thanksgiving will require a reordering of every priority in our lives. We will do this work each week in each month of the new year.

VII.

Of course, I loaned the \$20. Who do you think I am, a stingy bridesmaid? Later, my friend bought beers and we watched Game Seven of the World Series, so we're even. Life is so blessed when we trust in the radical and overwhelming abundance of God's love.