

Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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November 12th, 2017

In today's gospel, it's wedding season! That means there will be a big party! In Jesus' time, the wedding feast was an enormous communal celebration. Weddings were not about personal choice or lavish expense. Instead, weddings celebrated new life and commitment. Not just the new life and commitment of the couple, but the rebirth of the entire community. But, at today's wedding, there was one problem –oil; more specifically, olive oil.

We heard that ten bridesmaids had gathered to escort the bridegroom to the party. Five had extra oil and were called “wise.” The other five did not have extra oil and were called “foolish.” Later in the story, we discovered that these fools missed the party because they were looking for oil.

I wonder why these foolish bridesmaids didn't bring extra oil. Maybe they were young, naïve, and at their first wedding – so, how would they know to bring extra oil? Perhaps it was economics, and they simply could not afford extra oil. Could it be that they were simply forgetful? Well, the reason why they don't have the oil doesn't seem to matter to Jesus.

Either way, the bridegroom approached! In response, the bridesmaids trimmed their lamps, and the fools asked the wise for some oil. However, there was not enough oil. So, the “wise” bridesmaids told the fools to go buy oil. And, because the fools listened to the “wise,” they never made it to the celebration. Buying oil wasted time. The oil wasn't important. And both the wise and

the foolish bridesmaids missed that point. For, as the narrator summarized, the moral of the story was a call to “keep awake” or, in other words, to “stay engaged in the task.”¹

You see, oil *was* the problem. But, the *lack* of oil was not the problem; rather, the problem was their *obsession* with oil. You follow? The issue was not an oil shortage. Presumably the bridesmaids could have bummed some light off the wise or simply stumbled along in the darkness. Instead, the problem was that all of the bridesmaids obsessed over oil instead of what mattered.

You and I have that same problem. We obsess and focus on the silliest of things. We waste hours trying to find the best “deal” on products and services. We fixate on cultivating a specific persona at work, school, or home. We focus on negatives instead of positives. We criticize instead of asking a question. We, like the bridesmaids, quickly self-soothe searching for an answer to our supposed “problem” while ignoring all that really matters.

Now, imagine a different parable. What if the wise were clever and offered to share their light? What if the fools didn’t go looking for oil? Might the bridegroom come and have compassion on the dwindling flames of the foolish? In the end, would the oil really matter? We don’t know how the story could have ended. However, we do know that focusing on the oil was not important.

So, this parable begs the question: “Where have you lost sight of what is important?” To answer that question, it’s helpful to understand God’s focus.

Our other readings help us see God’s focus for our lives. In Amos, we heard the prophet respond to a worshiping community who was obsessive about festivals, religious practices, and rituals. Amos, however, reminded them to concentrate on justice and seek righteousness. In First Thessalonians, Paul reminded us that we have a loving, benevolent God who does not leave us

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1534-my-bad-dream>

behind. Our God sees our foolish selves, holding an empty lamp, and still invites us to join in the feast.

Each week we gather here to be reminded of what really matters. In our daily lives, it's easy to obsess about the oil instead of the banquet feast. It's easy for us to wander in the darkness alone, instead of standing in the darkness with others. It's easy for us to clam up, keep to ourselves, and forego vulnerability to project an image of control.

Yet, we gather at the font to recall what really matters. During confession, we speak truth about our identity, namely that we are foolish, self-centered, and misaligned. And at the same time, we, like Isla, are reminded that God loves our foolish selves. Even when we stand with an empty lamp, we are called to learn about God's justice and to strive for divine righteousness. That is why we come here each week to hear the word of God, to experience God's spirit in one another, and become Christ's body in this holy meal.

You see, this banquet table is central. This is our focus. This table is set for foolish people. Here, we find renewal because all are welcomed. Here, we discover God's presence in stories shared. Here, we find loving commitment as we gather for Isla's baptism. Here, in this place, we find our focus - right here, at God's banquet table. Amen.