

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year A

Awakened to Shine

Matthew 25:1-13

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Brad Haugen

1Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' 7Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 9But 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.' 10And 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. 11Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' 12But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' 13Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.



DIAGNOSIS: Shut Out and Extinguished

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Burned Out

As a result of all the upheaval in 2020, we are burned out. Sure, there continue to be flashpoints of controversy during the election season, amid an ongoing pandemic. And, yes, the political right and left continue to score points against each other. We escape into alternate realities where we hear what they want to hear; we call it truth. Passions, hatred, and anger are briefly ignited before quickly burning out again. We cannot be sustained by being told what we want to hear about who our enemies are, what our country should be, or how bad or how good everything is under the current administration. We are depleted—burned out.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Fatigued, Asleep

The kingdom of heaven is like “ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom” (Matthew 25:1NRSV). We

soon learn, “As the bridegroom was delayed, all of [the bridesmaids] became drowsy and slept” (Matthew 25:5). What are we waiting for? As the bridegroom is delayed in coming, the effects of a pandemic, systemic racism, economic insecurity, and anti-democratic nationalism are all prolonged and intensified. The change for which we wait is delayed. Zoom fatigue set in months ago. We forget that the bridegroom has promised to come, even though he is delayed. As we anticipate his coming, we are not eager, expectant, or hopeful. Rather, his is one more unfulfilled promise, yet another delay among so many. We do not realize that, in fact, the bridegroom has already been among us as one of us. And so, we grow weary, restless, and hopeless in our waiting. We fall asleep.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): A Closed Door

The bridesmaids missed the wedding. The bridegroom had been hanging on a cross, humiliated and defeated. The centurion had announced, “Truly this man was God’s Son” (Matthew 27:54). But we have a hard time believing him—not after how the bridegroom died. After all, these sorts of deaths happen all the time. Jesus doesn’t appear to be the exception here. Crucified as a criminal, it appears that Jesus had the door to heaven shut on him. We certainly wouldn’t want to end up like him or with him, for that matter.

We give up on Jesus. We let our lights go out rather than shine before others, and then no one sees him through us. Following the shocking announcement of his resurrection and coming again, they shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him” (Matthew 25:6), the bridegroom whom we thought was dead, consequently says to us: “I do not know you.” As we fail to recognize and believe in him, so he does not recognize us. The door to heaven is shut.

PROGNOSIS: Invited and Refueled



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): An Open Door

The bridegroom himself experienced being unknown to God, forsaken by the Father: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46), he cried out from the cross. The oil in his lamp had run out, so to speak. He had become sin, our sin, and his light no longer shined to glorify his Father in heaven. But this bridegroom, who risked being unknown to God, did so because he was resolved to open the heavenly banquet to those who were also unknown to God. As one who had experienced the door to heaven closed to him in his own God-forsakenness, he identifies with the foolish bridesmaids and opens that door to all forsaken by God. Then there is the astonishing decision on the part of the Father to raise the Son who died unknown and forsaken. It turns out that the bridegroom fully and completely relies on his Father to supply the fuel to make his own light

shine. And the bridegroom resolves to do likewise for all whose fuel has run out and whose lamplight has faded.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Awakened and Invited

The promise that the door to the wedding banquet has been opened to us, despite our having been unknown and forsaken by God, fills us with hope and joy. Knowing that the bridegroom identifies with us in our God-forsakenness, and that he himself had become the unknown foolish bridesmaid on the cross, brings light into the darkness that has made us so weary. The invitation, "Come to the banquet," shines perpetually into the darkness of our own lives. We are awakened to new possibilities in relation to the bridegroom who took our foolishness upon himself to make us wise. Rather than resort to naïve optimism or cynical despair, we view the challenges and injustices of our world with a hopeful realism. As God, through his Son the bridegroom, unfailingly meets us in our own darkness, we can humbly draw closer to others whose darkness we fear, trusting that the light from the heavenly wedding banquet shines on all of us.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Sharing in the Light

The oil that keeps our lamps burning is no longer in short supply. We no longer rely on scoring points against our opponents, political and otherwise, going from flashpoint to flashpoint to keep us from burning out. Because of the bridegroom, we have gained the wisdom that we cannot keep our own lamps burning, our own spirits alive, by attempting to snuff out others. If we were afraid of burning out and running out of oil ourselves, we would send people away to get their own oil—to replenish their own spiritual reserves. But now we know that

this would be a foolish thing to do. We're better off sharing the light that has dawned on all of us – the light shining from the promise that is the open door to the wedding banquet. We're better off telling others when they shine hope into our darkness, and then letting them know where we believe that light is coming from. We're better off sharing the oil and flame that can light all our lamps and keep them burning, especially within each other's darkness, until the bridegroom one day returns for us all.