

Perhaps, unwittingly, this bride expected that she would be able to alter her husband! I suspect all brides and grooms have expectations about what married life will be like. Maybe that's why Jesus used the parable of the ten bridesmaids to teach about the coming of God's Kingdom.

Wedding services have altered significantly over the generations, so let me give you a little background on the wedding traditions of ancient Israel. Then, as now, weddings take a lot of preparation. In ancient Israel, preparations for a wedding included three-steps: the arrangement, the betrothal, and the wedding. The first step toward marriage involved an arrangement made by the parents, often while the bride and groom were still young children. Our idea of a couple falling in love and choosing each other is a modern-day custom; in the ancient world marriages were considered primarily as financial agreements that gave social stability to the larger community. Thus, parents arranged marriages for the good of their families and the community.

The second step toward marriage was the betrothal. Unlike today's engagements which tend to be quite short, couples in ancient Israel were betrothed for a year or longer before the wedding ceremony. To become betrothed, typically, the groom would pay a price to the bride's father (a dowry) and sign an official document publicly stating his intention to marry the bride. With the announcement of the betrothal, the bride and groom considered themselves legally joined: they could refer to each other as husband and wife, they could reside together, and the betrothal could only be broken by death or divorce.

Near the end of the betrothal the families prepared for the actual wedding ceremony. If the bride and groom came from different towns, it was possible that they had not seen each other much during their betrothal year. If this was the case, then it was during the wedding festivities that the bride and groom became acquainted.

Courtship and romance happened during the feasts that followed the wedding ceremony. The parties that followed could last up to a week or more with dancing and laughter, drinking and speeches. The celebrations also included games designed to help the couple get to know each other.

One of the traditional games during the wedding week involved the best man or a trusted friend of the groom distracting the crowd so that the groom could steal his bride away for some private time. The groom would take the bride to a secluded place where he would court her: he would, in effect, speed-date her. Then the bride would quietly make her way back to

the party; to be followed by the groom sometime later. In this romantic game of hide-and-seek it was the job of the bridesmaids to be prepared to celebrate the arrival of the groom.

Now that we understand this courtship game, we can see why Jesus compared his return to the return of the groom to the party. He encourages his followers to prepare for his return in the way that bridesmaids prepared for the arrival of the groom. Jesus mentions five bridesmaids who wisely prepared for the arrival of the groom by keeping enough oil in their lamps to last in case he was delayed. He also mentions five bridesmaids who foolishly failed to prepare their lamps and so they ran out of oil. The bridesmaids all expected the groom, but some were ready when he arrived and some were not.

So let me ask the traditional Advent question: are you ready for the return of Jesus or will you be caught off guard? Are you wisely prepared or are you foolishly unsuspecting? Is there enough oil in your lamp to keep it burning bright?

The day after Thanksgiving, I checked the oil in Karen's minivan (something, I admit, I had not done in quite some time) and I found it was almost two quarts low. I'm not a car guy, but even I know what happens when the engine is out of oil. A thin film of oil, as little as a few thousandths of an inch, is all that separates the moving parts of your engine. Under pressure, this thin film keeps metal parts, such as the crankshaft and bearings, from actually touching each other and damaging each other. Under normal circumstances, this oil is constantly being pumped in to maintain that critical clearance; but if the oil pressure drops, due to pump failure or lack of oil, that protective and lubricating film of oil disappears and metal parts start grinding together. When the pistons are not lubricated they will heat up through friction, and if left unchecked, the metal of the piston and the cylinder will fuse together and the pistons will seize. Then the engine will stop working and you will need to replace the engine to get the car running again.

We need to prepare for long car journeys by putting enough oil in the engine. If we expect the engine to run properly, we need to anticipate the engine's need. It's the same with our spiritual life: we need to prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus by keeping our lamps filled, their wicks trimmed, and their lights burning. If we are expecting Jesus to return, then we need to have enough oil in our lamps to last until he arrives.

Some Biblical scholars suggest that the oil in the lamps represents God's Spirit. This makes sense, Biblically speaking, because oil is often used to represent the work of the Holy Spirit in

human lives. For example, when a king or queen is anointed, the oil used for the anointing represents the Spirit of God being poured out upon the monarch. So the oil in the lamps might represent the Holy Spirit and how we must be in touch with God's Spirit in order to be ready for the return of Jesus.

But there might be more to it: this parable is one part of a trilogy of parables Jesus tells in Matthew 25. All three parables are about the return of Jesus and the coming Kingdom of God. The second parable tells of three servants trusted with different amounts of money: two faithfully used the funds during their master's absence, while the third simply buried the treasure and didn't use it at all. The third parable is about sheep and goats: the sheep help those less fortunate while the goats do not even notice the needy people around them. Jesus commends the faithful servants and the sheep for using their gifts in the service of others. So, then, the oil might be the oil of kindness and service.

In his parables, Jesus tells us that he expects his followers to use their gifts, to share their blessings, and to fill their lives with the Holy Spirit in order to be ready for his return. Some will be found faithful at his return and hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Others will hear him say, "I don't know you." Like the bride in our opening story, if we move toward Jesus expecting to alter him or his expectations of us, we might need to refill our lamps with the Holy Spirit. Advent is a good time to check the oil.

Prayer: The Advent story of hope and mystery, anticipation, preparation, a kingdom of this world and the next, and a king appearing when we least expect. Heaven touching earth, the footsteps of the divine walking dusty roads as once they did in Eden, and a people, searching for a Savior, and walking past the stable. Open eyes and hearts, that this might be an Advent of hope to the world. Amen.

Expecting Jesus' Return

Sunday, December 6, 2015 – Advent 2

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Matthew 25:1-13

The young bride was extremely nervous at the wedding rehearsal. The pastor tried to calm her fears by giving her tips on how to remain calm as she walked down the aisle. The pastor said, "When you come in the back door of the church, don't worry about who is there or not. Don't even look at the congregation. All I want you to do is to look a few steps ahead of you down the aisle. Just focus on the aisle. When you've walked about halfway down the aisle, then lift your eyes and look straight ahead to the altar. Don't look left or right, focus on the altar. Finally, when you get near the front, I want you to look at the groom. Focus on him. He is waiting for you."

The pastor then asked the bride to repeat where she was going to look as she came down the aisle. The nervous bride responded, "Let's see. When I come in the back door, I look straight down the aisle. Then when I'm halfway to the front I look straight up at the altar. Finally, when I get near the front, I look at the groom. I look at him because he is waiting for me." The pastor encouraged her to repeat this to herself that night and she would do fine the next day.

On the day of the wedding, the bride looked calm and beautiful as she arrived at the church. As she came through the back door of the church, her eyes were firmly fixed on the aisle. As she moved down the aisle some of the guests sitting in the pews heard her repeating: "Aisle...altar...him. I'll alter him."