

When word comes that the Groom is near the Bridesmaids re-kindle their lamps. The five Foolish Bridesmaids without oil ask the other five to share. The Wise Bridesmaids refuse knowing that if they give away some of their oil, they risk running out of oil, too. The five Wise Bridesmaids stay, lamps lit, and wait for the Groom. The five Foolish Bridesmaids rush out to buy more oil, a near impossibility at midnight.

Weddings in Jesus' day had three parts. The Promise of Marriage was a contract between families, usually accompanied by the payment of a dowry by the Bride's father. The Betrothal included a public exchange of vows and gifts and signified the legal marriage of the couple and could only be broken by a divorce decree. The final phase, the Wedding Feast, could happen anytime up to a year after the betrothal and lasted anywhere from three days to a week. After the Wedding Feast the couple finally lived together as husband and wife.

What the parable describes is Day One of the wedding feast. The Groom's arrival kicked off the festivities. The Bridesmaids would go out to meet the Groom and escort him to the banquet hall. Since this is a night wedding, the Bridesmaids would need lamps to light the way. Bridesmaids needed to plan and be ready for the Groom. In our parable, five of the Bridesmaids planned poorly, ran out of oil, and could not fulfill their duties.

When the Groom arrives, the five Wise Bridesmaids escort him to the banquet hall, and the festivities begin. When the five Foolish Bridesmaids return, they are refused admittance. They bungled their one duty as Bridesmaids; now they are a disruption to the celebration, and the Groom says he doesn't even know them. The Groom is not willing to wait for those who are not ready, nor will he be distracted from the celebration.

The point of the parable is pretty straightforward: Jesus is the Groom and we are the Bridesmaids. We cannot know when the Jesus is coming, so we must prepare now, and stay awake, watching for his coming. The only time to prepare and to plan is now. When Jesus arrives, it will be too late. His arrival will signify the end of "business as usual," and initiate God's new Kingdom. Those not ready when Jesus arrives will be completely and permanently shut out of the heavenly wedding feast. Jesus will not wait for those who are not ready or who come late to the party.

The good news of the parable is this: it is possible to invert Murphy's Law. In fact, there's even a term for this: Yhprum's Law. It's Murphy's Law spelled backwards. Yhprum's Law

says that anything that can go right, will go right. The five Wise Bridesmaids in our parable knew Yhprum's Law. They brought extra oil, guarded their resources carefully, and performed their duties as expected. They greeted the Groom, escorted him to the banquet hall, and joined in the celebrations.

The parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids is a cautionary tale for the church, the Bride of Christ. We do not know the day or the hour when Jesus, the Groom, will come so we must be prepared and attentive. This is a parable about being Christ's faithful disciples while we wait for his return. This is a parable about the Church doing what it knows is right and laying the groundwork for God's promised Kingdom. It means being prepared in case everything goes wrong, while working to ensure that everything goes right.

When I visited Jerusalem, I took the opportunity to explore Hezekiah's tunnel. King Hezekiah (715-686 BC) ordered this tunnel built to draw water into the city before the invasion by the Assyrians. Tourists can walk through the tunnel which still transports water, sometimes waist deep. There are no guides, but each traveler is given a candle (much like the ones we get on Christmas Eve) to light the expected 20-minute journey through the tunnel.

I visited the tunnel with a friend and we bravely set off. Our candles did the trick, allowing us to see a few feet in front of us, until I dropped mine in the water with no matches to re-light it. My friend's candle lasted longer, but so did the journey. After 40-minutes stumbling through the tunnel, his candle sputtered and died. We panicked. Then we heard a noise behind us, and then a voice. Another adventurer, who followed us into the tunnel, kept his candle unlit. He used our light to navigate the first part of the tunnel. When our light died, he lit his candle (he also thought to bring matches!) and we made our way out of the tunnel.

My tunnel experience was a Murphy's Law scenario. What should have taken 20 minutes took over an hour. Our light died. We were cold and wet. But in this case, as a group, we were able to invert Murphy's Law. As church, the same thing can happen. My friend and I didn't carry an *extra* candle, but as a group we had enough light. The church, a diverse body of people of different sizes, backgrounds, needs, and perspectives has enough "candlepower" and "candle people" to refuel, rekindle, and recharge the soul-lamps of those people whose flame is flickering.

The success of the church in the world is predicated in part on it taking advantage of critical opportunities. If the church misses the moment, the moment may be lost. Who needs help today? How can we help now? The failure of the five Foolish Bridesmaids to respond to the Bridegroom's call, a tardiness occasioned by their lack of readiness, is irredeemable. Jesus calls the church to the banquet now, to fulfill its mission now, to open the door of opportunity now, to take the first step of faith now.

It may very well be that the church, Federated Church, is snoozing while it waits, or maybe just wondering what's going to happen next. Either way, we need to wake up and be prepared and attentive to what's happening around us. We need to tap into our candlepower to achieve the mission Jesus calls us to.

A church with candlepower is a church that shows. The spadework is done. The foundation is built. The groundwork is finished. The plans are drawn. Everything needed for the success of the mission is gathered. A church with candlepower shows up, with candles at the ready, wicks trimmed, prepared to work.

A church with candlepower is a church that glows. It is a church in touch with the Holy Spirit, the external power source that gives all the prior preparation its explosive and enlightening energy. A glowing church is one which is more than a mere candle, but rather a torch that lights the way for others.

A showing and a glowing church is a church which prays, a church which studies, a church which worships, a church which remembers the sacraments, a church which offers praise and thanksgiving. A showing church is ready for whatever comes. A glowing church lights the way for others. With such a church, Murphy doesn't stand a chance.

Prayer: Visioning God, we are the church that lives into your future today. A church united across space and time. A church of many races, languages and ethnicities. A church that lives by the work of God in Christ that was, is now, and is still to come. The one who is seated on the throne says to us: "See, I am making all things new!" A new heaven and a new earth, where the home of God is among God's people. Your future is epic, and it is good news. Send your Holy Spirit to help us prepare for what lies ahead. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Murphy's Law Inverted

Sunday, November 4, 2018

Matthew 25:1-13

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Edward Aloysius Murphy, Jr. (1918–1990) was an American aerospace engineer who worked on safety-critical systems for the U.S. Military and NASA, most notably on the Apollo space program. He is best known for his namesake "Murphy's law," which states, "Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong."

Murphy's Law is familiar to most of us. You know how it goes! You're working on your car and your hands are coated with grease, and that's when your nose begins to itch. You drop a tool and it rolls to the least accessible corner of the garage. You're in the shower and the phone rings. You drop a PB&J sandwich: it always lands face down on the carpet but face up on the tile floor. You get all dressed in your winter gear and then you need to use the restroom. The checkout line or traffic lane you switch to now becomes the slowest moving one. Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong. It's Murphy's Law.

Our parable is perhaps the best-known biblical illustration of Murphy's Law. Ten Bridesmaids are preparing for the arrival of the Groom at a wedding. The Groom is delayed, and the hour is late, and the bridesmaids fall asleep. At midnight the news comes that the Groom is near. The Bridesmaids wake and prepare, but to their horror, five of the Bridesmaids find their lamps are out of oil and won't light, so they scramble to find more. In their absence the Groom arrives and bolts the door behind him and refuses them entry. Everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. It's a big, ole Murphy's Law scenario!

There's a lot here, so, let's unpack this parable a little. The wedding takes place in the evening, something not be uncommon in Jesus' day. An evening wedding allowed guests time to complete household chores or to travel from neighboring villages. But the Groom is late, VERY late, and the wedding party falls asleep.

It is surprising that the guests stayed so late. This may indicate that the Bride and Groom belong to socially important families: no one was willing to leave for fear of insulting them. Or maybe it was worth waiting for the promised feast. Or maybe the distance home was too great to undertake at night. Whatever the reason, the guests wait for the Groom to arrive.