

“Hold on to what is good”

There is something about parable we just heard that bothers me. It does not feel rich with Good News or compassion. As Meister Eckhart wrote, "Whatever God does, the first outburst is always compassion." I do not see that in this parable. Matthew begins with, "The Kingdom of Heaven will be like this." Really? If so, then the Kingdom of Heaven is going to be very appealing to eight-year-olds. That is the age when our moral and ethical development embraces the concept of fairness. The foolish maids did not bring extra oil. Their lamps are about to die out so they must go buy more. They don't get back for the banquet before the doors close and are locked out. But what's fair is fair. They did not prepare well so they are out of luck. It may be fair, but is it heaven?

The customary interpretations of this Gospel are too easy and pat. Traditional understanding of this gospel is that the wise bridesmaids are good Christians and the foolish ones are not so good Christians. (I will leave out the interpretations that have this parable pitting Christians against Jews. After all if Jesus told this parable there were no Christians yet, and he was a Jew. That interpretation makes no sense at all.) Good Christians arm themselves with righteous deeds (that is the extra oil). Not so good Christians are along for the ride and don't have the righteous deeds that ready them for the long haul. The long haul is the waiting for the bridegroom, Jesus, to return at the Parousia.¹ The not so good Christians are locked out of the wedding feast (i.e. the eternal banquet in heaven). So, like a Boy Scout, good Christians will be prepared for the coming of the Lord, for no one but the Father in heaven knows when the son will return in glory.

This parable does not seem to fall in line with the rest of Matthew's Gospel. The Jesus that is speaking here does not seem to be the Jesus that I know. For instance, the wise bridesmaids are unwilling to share the oil. Earlier in The Gospel of Matthew Jesus admonishes followers to never deny a request. Specifically, if someone asks you to go a mile go a second one as well. Give you cloak when only your shirt is requested. "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."² So why do these bridesmaids turn down their friends?

Finally, at the end of the Gospel the late returning bridesmaids are locked out because they are unknown to the bridegroom. This is another tough response and one that does not jibe with earlier teaching in the Gospel. See Matthew 7:7-8 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

This parable may not jibe with what we think of as the teaching of Jesus for good reason. Many scholars believe that this parable was written by

¹ The word "Parousia" is mainly used in Christian theology to refer to the second coming of Christ.

² Matthew 5:38-42

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Matthew and not Jesus. Matthew is writing for his community which has waited nearly fifty years for Jesus' return. They have seen the calamity of the Great Jewish War which led to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the razing of that great city. They have seen the slaughter of the rebels by the Roman oppressor at Masada. They are wondering if they have put their faith in the wrong messiah. As we heard in the reading from the Letter to Thessalonians, Paul sought to quiet that community's anxiety and they had only waited twenty years.

Paul and Matthew are trying to buck up the followers. They are encouraging them to hold on to what is good. Twenty centuries later there are those who think that it is foolishness that we still await Christ's return. Martin Luther wrote, "If Christ were coming again tomorrow, I would plant a tree today." I take that to mean that regardless of the timing of the Parousia³ (the second coming of Christ in glory) we are to continue to do the best we can for people and for the creation.

Friends, don't lose faith. God is with us. God's time is not our time. There are wars and rumors of wars. There are false messiahs come to distract us from the true messiah. Even at the very worst of times God is here.

I will end with a benediction, a good word, which is a favorite of mine and one I will surely use throughout my ministry here. It is adapted from a variety of biblical writings.⁴ I pray that you will find these words as supporting and encouraging as I have.

"Go out into the world in peace. Have courage! Hold on to what is good. Return no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the suffering. Honor everyone. Love and serve God rejoicing in the power of the Spirit."

Thanks be to God.

³ The word "Parousia" is mainly used in Christian theology to refer to the second coming of Christ.

⁴ See 1 Corinthians 16:13; 2 Timothy 2:1; Ephesians 6:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:13-22; and 1 Peter 2:17.;