

Sermon: “Wise Bridesmaids” (Matt 25: 1-13)

Consortium Orientation for New Students, September 6, 2007
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When I visited my family and relatives in Taiwan this past summer, a nephew was drafted to join the army. Obviously, this was a big deal to the family, especially when so many wars are waging on in the world, and there is a real threat of force across the Strait of Taiwan. We all know that the new life in the army for a young college graduate won't be as easy as taking adventures on vacation. So, we called together a family service to send him off with prayers, words of scripture, and all kinds of advice.

Before he was allowed to wear the uniform as a soldier, of course, he had to receive basic training in a boot camp. One of the main purposes of boot camp is, as you know, to transform a civilian into a soldier who may think, speak, walk, and fight like a soldier to defend the country. So, what do they do in the boot camp when new draftees come in? The very first thing they do is to line up these young men and shave their heads, 20 seconds each, to signal a brand new beginning. I am glad that Fr. Crossin does not line you up and shave your head, when you come to this Consortium orientation. But a new beginning has indeed begun for all of you, has it not?

Attending seminary or divinity school is starting a new chapter in your life. It is full of excitement, anticipation, and hope, and perhaps with a dose of uncertainty, anxiety, or worry. In this week one of your seminary career, you have already been exhausted by the hospitable welcome of your school mates and may be feeling disoriented by the complicated orientation process of your institutions. And now, yet another orientation from the Consortium! Nonetheless, my sincere congratulations and best wishes to you. We are all glad that you are here.

You might be wondering: Why do we read the “parable of the ten virgins or bridesmaids”? What does it have to do with beginning a seminary study?

I have chosen this scripture reading for three reasons. First, this parable presents an important theological theme you will soon learn and wrestle with in different courses, that is, **eschatology**, a study of the *eschaton*, the last thing at the end of time as God will deal with it. Just to name a few as example: the kingdom of God, eternal life, parousia (i.e. the second coming of Christ), and final judgment – these are all eschatological topics. Soon you will have to find out, by preaching the coming of the kingdom of God, whether Jesus has in mind a realized eschatology, or future eschatology, or self-realizing eschatology, or an apocalyptic eschatology. And what does that mean for the Church, theologically and ethically? The parable of ten bridesmaids is set in a joyful wedding, a biblical symbol for the joining together of the loving God and God's people (Isa 54:5; Hos 2:16). The Bride, the bridesmaids, and guests have all been dressed up and ready for the Groom to arrive. It is an exciting and anxious moment. In a similar way, Christians live in a spiritual state between “love and hope,” a temporal stage between “grace and judgment,” and an existence between “already and not yet.” We are redeemed children of God living in a world of sin, and in Paul's words, we wait and groan with the whole creation for the final glory of resurrection (Rom 8:22-25). Anticipation for the coming End gives us a clear goal, helps us set priorities, and keeps our perspective forward and upward on the prize of our heavenly call.

Secondly, like other eschatological parables in Ch. 24 and 25, this parable is addressed to the Church in general and its leaders in particular. The Greek word for “bridesmaid” is *parqenoi* meaning **virgin**, so it might refer to the Church, which has been cleansed to be a pure and undefiled Bride for Christ the Groom (2 Cor 11:2). However, the ten virgins' role in the drama of this parable is to welcome and usher in the Groom, the literary context suggests that these virgins are meant to refer to the “**bridesmaids**” who are virtuous friends, chosen to serve the Groom and the Bride on their wedding. Since the Groom is Christ and the Bride is the Church, these bridesmaids are both servants of Christ and leaders of the Church, like you and me. By now you may have begun to see a connection between this parable and your purposes in attending seminary.

Thirdly, when the Groom comes late, all ten bridesmaids fall asleep. When he finally arrives, however, five wise bridesmaids have extra oil to light up their lamps, but the others don't and are therefore shut out of the banquet. What distinguishes the "wise" (fro,nimoj) from the foolish is their "thoughtfulness and prudence" in carrying extra oil for contingency. The wise are called so, because they take time and mind to make extra preparation. They do not want to miss their chance to serve the wedding for any reason, and they are so inclined because they love the Groom and the Bride, and they are faithful to their mission. Isn't the virtue of faithful love that leads to wise and thoughtful ministry what God is asking of us?

So, what can we learn from this parable, as we embark our seminary career? Let me share with you three points.

I. Become Bridesmaids: New Identity

Attending seminary is a special calling, a divine gift, and a personal commitment. It is an enormous decision that you and your family have made. Most of you have made prayerful soul-searching and vocational discernment, and some have gone through a long process of review and examination from your denominations before you even submit your application. The commission or committee wants to know the inner sense and outer signs of your call, because you are entering varied programs of study at the seminaries that will make you licensed leaders of the Church, lay and ordained, to serve God and people in different ministries. You are becoming bridesmaids for the kingdom of God!

In fact, you will soon find that you are given a new identity: a seminarian, the future priest, pastor, teacher, counselor and so on. When you go to churches on Sunday, people will treat you with special courtesy and perhaps expect a little more of wisdom from whatever you say. When you visit home, old friends may say, Oh you are now a seminarian, perhaps we should meet at the Starbucks rather than the local bar. How you adjust, adapt, and grow into this new identity is an exciting and humbling process. The sooner you own up to this new identity, the better you will know how to relate to others. This may not be easy at times, because new identity means that you need to change your pattern of life. In order to make it to morning prayer everyday, now you need to give up sitting late. In order to focus on studies, you may have to give up some recreational activities. Vocational development is a process of continuous conversion in the way you think, value, and live. This is why keeping a spiritual discipline, joining a small prayer group, and seeking spiritual direction are good ideas. They may help you become bridesmaids.

2. Be Faithful and Wise: New Attitude

Going to seminary is demanding, both spiritually and intellectually. In order to be equipped with solid knowledge and proficient skills to serve in varied ministries, you will need to study, research, plan, and write. Some of you may have begun to study Hebrew, Greek, or Latin in the summer. And all of you, I am sure, understand the importance of studying Scripture, church history, theology, ethics, ministry, education, and the list of studies is long. How on earth can one absorb and retain so much information (2000 years worth of the tradition and experience of the Church), analyze and digest so many concepts critically (the intimidating volumes of St. Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and Barth), and be able to communicate effectively and creatively in papers, sermons, and conversations to the people in the pew and on the streets (and there are so many different age groups, in different communities, and yes including Republicans, Democrats, and Independents). And you have only two or three years. We better adjourn this orientation and hurry home to study right away.

In fact, before the first exegesis paper and the first set of exams, some of you may begin to doubt whether you have the calling after all. Why did I give up my good job? Why did I sell my nice house? Why did I drag my whole family here to DC? And why did I give my dog away too soon? Indeed, frustration may creep in before you know it. So you really need to be wise. Faithfulness means that we find a wise way to prepare ourselves for ministry and service. To meet so many unexpected challenges and crises, we need to carry extra oil.

3. Carry Extra Oil: New Way of Life

What does that extra oil mean? What does it refer to or symbolize for Jesus and Matthew, especially when it makes such an irreversible difference on the fate of the bridesmaids?

(1) John Chrysostom thinks of the oil as “humanity, almsgiving, [and] succor to them that are in need.” He has a good exegetical point, because in the next parable, “the sheep and the goats” (Matt 25.31-46), it is the loving care for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned who are “the least of my brothers and sisters” that will send the righteous into eternal life. Here we see why almsgiving to the poor is highly prized in the practice of Orthodox tradition.

(2) St. Augustine interprets the oil as “charity” because it is “the most excellent way above all the rest” (1 Cor 12.31) as “oil swims above all liquids.” And he says, “The lamps of the wise virgins burned with an inward oil, with the assurance of a good conscience, with an inner glory, with an inmost charity.” Here we may see why charity is considered a principal spiritual virtue in the Catholic moral tradition.

(3) John Calvin rejects allegorical interpretation and insists that the general instruction of this parable is to persevere till the end. All believers may be distracted by earthly occupations in their bodies, but those who persevere in serving only the Lord shall in the end be admitted into eternal joy. Those who cannot sustain their faith and service under worldly temptations, on the other hand, will be shut out of heaven. The oil therefore simply means perseverance in the face of daily challenges. Here we may see a connection to the Presbyterian theology of vocation and work ethics.

(4) John Wesley comments on the foolish bridesmaids saying that they “took no oil with them - No more than kept them burning just for the present. None to supply their future want, to recruit their lamp's decay. The lamp is faith. A lamp and oil with it, is faith working by love.” As for the wise, they “took oil in their vessels - Love in their hearts. And they daily sought a fresh supply of spiritual strength, till their faith was made perfect.” For Wesley, therefore, the oil that keeps the lamp burning bright is the love that seeks “fresh supply of spiritual strength” in order to make the faith perfect. This is in accordance with the Methodist teaching of sanctification as a continuous process of conversion after a believer is justified by grace.

In the history of interpretation of this parable, we can see that many godly and wise interpreters from different traditions of the Christian family have wrestled with the meaning of the scripture and shared their insights on what makes the bridesmaids wise: they are indeed virgins, pure and chaste in faith, who bring glory to God with their lamps of good works, but in the end it is the oil of their almsgiving, charity, perseverance, and spiritual strength that will sustain their work before God in the final judgment. If we are willing to listen to these ecumenical interpreters, we will be able to learn from their insights and become wise bridesmaids in serving Christ and the Church. This is a practical benefit of ecumenism, isn't it?

With this round of ecumenical interpreters, therefore, I want to remind you by saying how fortunate you are in attending seminaries in the DC area, because you are enrolled to study not only in one seminary, but in 16 member institutions of the Washington Theological Consortium, with incredible ecumenical and inter-faith resources. It is like going to Disney World. You buy one ticket, but you are entitled to wander and enjoy in all adventure areas and theme parks. I am not talking only about the privilege of taking courses and learning from different professors in other institutions. The immersion experience of worship and learning in other traditions of the Christian family and the opportunity to make friends with colleagues across denominations are not only eye-opening but life-changing. Do not pass over the chance to cross-register in other schools simply because it demands time of traveling or adjustment of studying habit. The rewards are plenty and enduring. It is also essential for your ministry. Just think about how many parishioners nowadays come from different churches of their upbringing. And most important of all, even as we are affiliated with specific denominations, we are serving the same kingdom of God.

May the gracious Lord who has called you here travel with you each and everyday as you gather oil to light up your lamp in the service of the Groom and the Bride. Amen.