

Sermon AMC- Waiting for the bridegroom

Scripture: Matt 25:1-13
2015

Sunday, March 15,

Our text today gives us an opportunity to talk about weddings. When was the last time you had a wedding in this church. I suspect it has been awhile. I love how weddings in this country are so well planned. They match the color of the flowers to the color of the dress and the color of the dress to the color of the shoes and the color of the shoes to the color of the centerpiece! Oh the formal dinners. The most unique thing about an American wedding though I think is the wedding rehearsal. Before I saw it for the first time I could never have imagined that people would rehearse where they are going to sit and stand. That is a lot of planning. The thing that might surprise you about Indian weddings is probably the size. When Sufi and I got married, we had over a 1000 guests at our wedding and that was just a regular wedding in Mumbai. Nothing unusual about it. But wedding customs vary too in every culture. Now unfortunately there is no description of a full wedding ceremony in the Bible so when trying to figure out the wedding customs of ancient Israel you have to glean it from bits and pieces of information from the laws in the book of Leviticus to the famous marriage between Isaac and Rebecca and other wedding references in the Gospels and Paul's writings and even other non-Biblical Jewish writings. There are people who spend their whole life researching things like this and thanks to them this is what we know about marriage customs in ancient Israel. The guy who wanted to get married would go to the father of the girl and make his intention known. The father of the girl would either agree or disagree in consultation with the girl. If he agreed they will discuss the dowry that the girl's father required to give his daughter away. If this was agreed to a formal agreement about all the arrangements would be discussed, and the couple would be officially betrothed. The betrothal was considered as binding as marriage and could only be broken by a divorce. However during betrothal the girl would still live in her father's house preparing for the marriage. No physical contact was allowed between the couple. When the betrothal was finalized, the groom to be would get up and leave telling his fiancée, "I am going to prepare a place for you" and then return to his father's house. Back home the boy's next task would be to build an extension to their existing house called the honeymoon chamber. It is adding a bedroom to the house. So when the honeymoon chamber is complete then the wedding will take place. Now because this room is built onto the groom's father's house, the father is the one who has to approve from plans to construction. So the groom himself when asked when the wedding is will

say, I don't know only my father knows. So no date can be set for the wedding and it totally depends on when the construction is complete. But when the construction is complete however, the celebration begins. This is what happens. First, the groom announces I am ready. Then he gathers his friends in the night. Then they blow a big trumpet called a shofar announcing that this house is ready and the groom is coming for his bride. Now word quickly reaches the bride's house. The bride meanwhile would have got her bridesmaids ready. Her bridesmaids have to be virgins who represent the bride. They will be accompanying the bride in the wedding procession and everyone in the wedding procession has to carry their own torches because the procession will be at night. The bridesmaid's also have the responsibility of welcoming the groom and ushering the groom and his party inside for the feast at the bride's house. After this celebration the bridesmaids would accompany the bride as the groom takes her in a very festive celebration to his house for a 7 day wedding celebration. So now you have a good idea of how the ancient Jewish wedding customs worked.

Now let's turn to the parable Jesus tells. Here the groom who was delayed for an extended period of time in his father's house is now finally on his way. The announcement was made, so everyone from the bride's side could get ready. Now the problem is that because the groom was delayed 5 out of the 10 bridesmaids ran out of oil in their lamps. They tried to ask the 5 who had extra but the 5 who had extra were not able to spare any because they knew that they needed all they had. So they ask the 5 foolish bridesmaids to go and get some from the store. Now the parable does not mention if they were successful in getting the oil or not, but when the 5 foolish bridesmaid's returned they find that the groom's party had already arrived and had gone inside. These 5 bridesmaids had missed their opportunity to welcome the groom. Now they find the door to the house is shut. They start calling from outside, Lord lord, open the door for us. But alas the words from the bridegroom are very chilling. The groom from inside, "believe me, I don't know you".

To unpack this parable we first have to identify the important elements in the story. The first and most obvious one is the bridegroom and it is quite easy to make the connection that he is representing Christ. The next character in the parable is very important but may not be very obvious. If the bridegroom is Jesus Christ then what is the bride representing? You guessed it, the bride is the church. Now you do not see the bride directly in the parable, but the bride is represented by her bridesmaids. This is a brilliant story element because now you can talk about the wise church and the foolish church. More on that in a bit. Back to the parable we also have the lamps and the oil in them to decipher. Now some commentators note that the lamps themselves represent faith and

the oil denotes the presence of the Holy Spirit. Now there is some debate about what the lamps actually represent but whatever it is they represent an interesting fact about this parable is that all 10 bridesmaids are all identical in almost every aspect even the fact that they all get tired of waiting for the bridegroom and fall asleep. The only difference between the two is that the foolish one's only carried a little oil in their lamps. And because they carried only a little oil they don't really seem prepared for actually waiting for the bridegroom. Not sure what they were thinking when they came as bridesmaids.

Right here is the most important part of the parable so we need to focus in on the picture Jesus is painting of the kind of church represented by the foolish bridesmaids. What Jesus is describing here is that this kind of church is one that seems to get almost everything right. You see even the foolish bridesmaids were virgins, denoting that they at least told the world that they had nothing to do with idolatry. They were also carrying the lamps that were mandatory for participating in the wedding procession. That means this church was not involved in idolatry and also has the right faith. But when it comes to the oil needed to make that faith shine in the dark world, now that was missing. In other words this church has everything that makes church church, except for the power of the Holy Spirit. Let's call this oilless Christianity.

Now where in the larger church do you see this kind of oil less Christianity? I believe that these are the cultural Christians who have all the outward elements of being a follower of Christ. They know how to dress for church, they know all the Bible stories, they know all the best pot luck recipes and the Sunday School routines. But there is one thing missing. They have never actually been born again. And as a result, they are missing the key ingredient, Holy Spirit driven life. This is actually the kind of Christian that I am well acquainted with because I was this kind of Christian for a long time. You see this kind of Christian is very comfortable where they are. They have a church life and then they have the rest of their life and matters of faith never cross over from Sunday to the weekdays. You see to be a Christian on a weekday takes real oil. But I have to say, the oilless Christians are fully aware that there is another kind of Christian as well. They know that there is a kind of Christian that lives out their faith in a very convicting way. A Christian who is not afraid of telling others about Jesus or turning their lives around for Jesus. The oilless Christian knows about the other kind of Christian but thinks of them as a little too crazy for me. In fact some oilless Christians go to the extent of saying that if Christ would actually appear in front of them then they would cast aside all their inhibitions reorder all their priorities and let God in the driver seat of their lives. But they would do this only if Christ appears in front of them like he appeared all those years ago.

This is like saying if Christ were to actually start his descent from the sky at his second coming, then I would borrow some oil from those zealous born again Christians and shout my Halleluia's as loud as they would. But until then I am going to act like a normal everyday person with a little Sunday faith. Now the problem with that is when you hear the announcement of Christ's return, it becomes too late to borrow some of that oil and be born again.

Now some of you may be thinking why? Why is it too late for these bridesmaids. Especially if they got everything else right. Also locking them out of heaven for all eternity, is that fair punishment for their attitude? You have to remember that not having enough oil was not just a momentary mistake. In fact you have to remember that the bridesmaid's were not punished for momentary mistakes. Remember all the bridesmaids fell asleep waiting for the groom. They were not punished for that at all. The 5 foolish bridesmaids were punished because they were not present to receive the groom. They were missing in action. And when they were missing in action and try to come later the groom says "who are you?" Not only that, the 5 foolish bridesmaids had plenty of time to recognize that they are not carrying the extra oil that the others were. Yet they did nothing about this deficit till they heard the announcement. The reason they did not fix the problem when they first realized they had a problem was because they did not care for the groom as much. This is in some ways similar to another parable Jesus tells about a feast this king throws, and the king's original guests don't come so the invitation is thrown open to everyone on the street. The banquet is full and everybody shows up in their Sunday best except for some people who come with their street clothes to the banquet. These people are thrown out of the party but they are thrown into hell for their oversight. In both cases not being prepared for the role is grounds for eternal condemnation.

This is serious stuff which begs the serious question. Is there anybody out there who can identify with these five bridesmaids. They were perfectly fine bridesmaid in every way and yet lacking the anointing of the Holy Spirit or being born again spiritually. John 3 says if you have not been born again spiritually you cannot enter the kingdom of God. So how can you be born again? Well, being born again is not something you decide to do because someone else is also doing it. That is like trying to borrow someone else's oil. Being born again is a deep and profound spiritual experience where the Spirit of God comes over you and overwhelms your own Spirit much like it did for the virgin Mary. When you are born again you suddenly are deeply convicted of your sins like never before. You will feel an acute need for the Saviour, you will then ask the Savior to forgive you and you will feel the weight of your sin lifted off your shoulder and nailed to the cross.

Then you will know in a deep way that Christ did not just die on the cross but he died on the cross for you in particular. That will begin a lifelong journey with Christ. This is what it means to be born again. Being born again is all about a willingness on your part to allowing the oil of God's Spirit to be poured into your life. With this oil you enter the kingdom of God right away. Without it you remain outside the kingdom of God. The good news is you do not have to remain an outsider looking in. You can come inside and enjoy the warm presence of God. It is not too late. All you have to do is pray and ask God to come into your life. He longs for it more than you can ever imagine. Don't wait till it is too late tough. A wedding feast is waiting for you. Let us pray.