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What Jewish father in Jesus' day would ever even consider letting his daughter camp out waiting for a groom to arrive for a wedding celebration? That was a worse idea than an unsupervised sleepover! Some smart-aleck in the crowd must have told Jesus, "The foolish ones were the families who let their daughters go out alone at night!"

The parable of the five foolish and five wise virgins waiting for the wedding party is a very odd story. We're now reading the final chapters of Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus is preparing people for the end times. So, he tells the story about the wise and foolish maidens. How can it be that nobody bats an eye at the fact that all the ladies in waiting are napping when the groom arrives? Staying awake is clearly not the point.

The realistic cultural image behind this story would have the ten virgins in question waiting at the bride's house, safely inside when they fell asleep and their lamps went out. They would have been planning to participate in the wedding procession that carried the flame from the bride's family hearth to the home she was going to share with her new husband. That image throws a different light on the parable.

This parable is about being prepared. Taking the story at face value we can guess that the wise virgins were the ones who knew and cared about what they were doing. They wanted to be a part of the celebration and did everything necessary to be able to participate fully. It didn't matter that they fell asleep, they were confident that whenever it started they would be ready — they had no worries to interfere with their siesta.

What about the others? What characterizes them as foolish? In Matthew 7, foolish people are the ones who heard Jesus' words and didn't bother to act on them. That sounds a lot like not bothering to procure the oil you'll need to relight your torch. The sleep of the foolish just might have been a sign of their general apathy. Their paltry preparation matched their lack of passion for the event itself. They were along for the ride; if the trip got too costly, they could find other diversions — that's how they had lived their lives.

That much may be clear, but parts of this story sound seriously non-evangelical. Why wouldn't the wise virgins share what they had with the others? Why did the groom refuse to let the latecomers in?

Jesus had said that wisdom consists in putting his words into practice. The wise young women's oil symbolized their store of experience of living the Gospel. Their discipleship prepared them to enjoy the party that was to come. Living the Gospel is not like hoarding oil or packing a backpack. It's more like riding a bike, learning a new language or being generous. You practice until it comes naturally. For the foolish to beg "lend us some of your oil of preparation" was as absurd as saying "Give me a bit of your balance so I can ride this bike." There are some things each person must do for her or himself and no amount of example from others can make up for their lack of action.

That brings us to the second questionable part of the parable. Why wouldn't the groom allow them in? For the simple fact that they weren't there for the party that was going on. Like the guy who showed up at the wedding feast without a festive garment, they didn't belong. Using the analogy above, it would be like saying "We're having a party to celebrate with everyone who learned Spanish this year! There's going to be great food, and all the conversation and entertainment will be in Spanish!" When a group rings the bell and asks to come in to give a lecture in Swahili or Latin they'll be turned away. They are simply not there for the celebration that is going on.

Some people tend to interpret this parable to show how many foolish people will be locked out of God's reign. That contradicts the way Jesus talked and acted. Jesus was all about opening the doors and getting everyone to enjoy the party. The caveat is that it is *God's* party that we're invited to enjoy — with absolutely everyone who cares enough to participate. The only requirement for admission is to hear the invitation and act like we want to be a part of it.

## **WISDOM 6:12-16**

The Book of Wisdom was written relatively close to the time of Jesus; scholars date it after 30 B.C.E., with the possibility that it could have even been written in Jesus' own days. That makes it roughly contemporary with Philo of Alexandria, the Jewish philosopher who tried to harmonize the Jewish traditions with Greek wisdom. Like other authors of scriptural texts who gave themselves famous pseudonyms, the author of the Book of Wisdom subtly assumed the identity of Solomon as a way of letting people know what kind of wisdom they would find in the book.

Our selection comes from the conclusion of the first part of the book and is an exhortation to seek wisdom for all the good she offers those who love her. The author's particular concern was to help Jewish people appreciate the wisdom of their tradition as they adjusted to being in the midst of the Greek culture. Thus, the book can serve to guide any believers who seek to reframe their faith as cultures change.

Following Wisdom's lead we can take on the task of mining the wealth the tradition offers in response to new challenges. We can approach today's reading as a guide for those who seek to understand God's ways in the signs of the times.

The reading opens with a promise that wisdom is unfading, which in the philosophy of the day meant that wisdom is eternal. That promises that even as times and cultures change, the core of God's offer to humanity retains its potential — no matter the language or context in which it is expressed.

The next phrase adds to that promise by saying that Wisdom is available to anyone who seeks her. As Moses told the people, God's ways are "not too wondrous or remote ... but very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it" (Deuteronomy 30:11-14). Wisdom is readily available to the willing.

Both the Book of Wisdom and Deuteronomy suggest that Wisdom is a personification of God's own Spirit reaching out and dwelling within us. This is the Spirit who hastens to make herself known, who is readily perceived and who will not disappoint. Deuteronomy states specifically what the Book of Wisdom will make explicit later: The purpose of wisdom is to lead one to act aright. As "Solomon" prays later in this book, "Send her forth ... that she may be with me and work with me ... Thus my deeds will be acceptable" (Wisdom 9:10-12).

Following Solomon's lead, we understand that Wisdom leads to integrity. Wisdom is easily perceived because all the world can recognize people who act with integrity, those whose actions transform their dogmas into concrete behavior. The person who has sought the ways of God stands out in the crowd.

The search for Wisdom offers a trajectory for life, a reciprocal and ongoing exchange with God. A person may seek Wisdom and Wisdom seeks people who are worthy of her. Each person must keep vigil, always growing, but Wisdom waits eagerly for every seeker. For those who seek, Wisdom is at the gate, at the door, always ready to accompany her lovers in whatever will come their way. Wisdom will lead us through the changing times.

## **1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18**

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul has been talking about the Parousia, the end of times. His people are genuinely eager for Christ's return and the vindication of all his beloved followers. But they have one faith-challenging worry: What about those who die before Christ's return? That's the question Paul addresses in this short selection.

Although we may not share that exact problem — most of us aren't really expecting the end of the world before our own demise — Paul's call to the community challenges us to reassess our faith just as they are called to do. This reading invites us to consider our beliefs about death and our response to it. Paul has some suggestions for us.

Paul's key phrase regarding how a Christian or Christian community approaches death is his desire that they "may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope." That assumes that people will grieve the death of a loved one, but that Christians will do it in a way marked by their faith.

To understand Paul's idea we might take a look at what the word *grieve* meant in Paul's world. Biblical scholar Earl Richard (*First and Second Thessalonians*) tells us that the word *grief* and its cognates "are often employed by Paul to describe the pain one human causes another ... a pain that can lead to repentance ... or be qualified as excessive or obstructive." Thus, grief is not necessarily a negative thing, although it can become all-consuming and thus destructive of life. That latter may be the sort of grief that Paul says "the rest" get caught up in.

How does Paul suggest that we grieve? What is good grief? Apparently, it is the grief of those who have hope. The grief of those who have no hope may be the fatalism that perceives no meaning in life beyond the momentary: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." That was not the Thessalonians' problem. Their concern came from unmet expectations; they wanted to meet Christ in glory before any of them departed this life. Paul insinuates that such an expectation was a plan, it was their agenda as opposed to hope in God.

The essence of Christian life is hope in God's future. Christ went to death with faith-filled hope, not a script. Paul's people were suffering because things weren't turning out as they had planned. In Paul's theology, their grief offered an opportunity for grace. In effect, he was saying, "Let yourselves be comforted by the fact that you are called beyond your plan and your agenda. Let this type of grief be a source of conversion."

Grieve, yes, says Paul, but grieve like Christians. Grieve like those who ache for union with their loved ones in the heart of God. Grieve like those who are longing for the Parousia — the day of Christ, when all will be caught up together in joy. Let your grief, like everything else in your life, be an expression of your faith and an opportunity to grow in it.

### **MATTHEW 25:1-13**

Whereas our first reading praised Wisdom and those who seek her, Jesus tells a tale contrasting the foolish and the wise — obviously inviting us to consider who is who, then and now. Here the group is evenly divided with five wise and five foolish virgins — that's a better scorecard than we got in Matthew 22:14 where we heard that many were called but only a few chosen.

Jesus told this story, but except for the obscure detail about the wise virgins having extra oil on hand, he didn't really explain what makes one wise or foolish. To understand that, we need to go back to what he said in Matthew 7:24-26: "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock ... And everyone who listens ... but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand."

The difference between foolishness and wisdom is that the wise hear the word and put it into practice. That was not a new revelation; Jesus was drawing on his tradition when he said it. Proverbs 13:9 tells us: "The light of the just gives joy, but the lamp of the wicked goes out." The idea is that the wicked or foolish create nothing worthwhile in their lives. As all creation is moving toward union with God, they have played no part in the drama of advancing toward that end. The little light they had simply fades away.

When we interpret this parable in the context of other parts of Matthew's Gospel, we get the idea that the wise virgins' oil of preparedness came from rock-solid habits of putting Jesus' words into practice.

In his 2017 homily for the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, Pope Francis could have been commenting on this parable when he said: "Let us ask ourselves if we are parlor Christians, who love to chat about how things are going in the Church and the world, or apostles on the go, who confess Jesus with their lives because they hold him in their hearts."

The parables that come toward the end of Matthew's Gospel are all calling us to look at our heart. The parable of the wise and foolish virgins asks us about our commitment for the long haul. Are we like the five who went to the house with just enough oil to check out what was happening? They were there for the entertainment, like people who knew about the bride and groom but who didn't have a significant attachment to them or the celebration. In contrast, the wise young women had been saving up for this occasion. They went early and planned to stay late. The wise ones had been practicing for this party. Nothing could dampen their enthusiasm. If the groom was late, that didn't matter; they knew he would come.

In both their waking and their dreaming, they were ready.

# Planning: 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's first reading speaks of wisdom as a "resplendent and unfading" gift that "is readily perceived by those who love her, and found by those who seek her." Seeking wisdom means some effort on our part. We unconsciously absorb the "wisdom" of our society, which is often diametrically opposed to divine wisdom. It takes effort for us to tune into God's wisdom, to learn to listen to the promptings of the Spirit within us.

November is a month associated with thoughts of death and those loved ones that death has claimed. What might planners do to help people embrace God's wisdom in the way they view both life and death?

St. Paul's words to the Thessalonians are a good starting point. He offers wisdom about death to these early converts so that they "may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep." The end of today's passage reinforces his point: "Thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, console one another with these words."

That final admonition reminds us that even those whose faith is strong still need consolation when a loved one has died. Faith is a shared gift, and the support of the community can be invaluable in helping a person cope with the sense of loss and devastation that can persist long after the funeral.

Many parishes, recognizing this need, offer a special prayer service during the month of November designed for those who are grieving, whether the grief is fresh or long-standing. A personal invitation might be given to all those whose loved one was buried from the parish during the previous year. An open invitation can also be extended to anyone who wishes to gather with other believers to remember those who have died.

Such a gathering, perhaps followed by a time of fellowship and refreshments, can be a concrete way to proclaim and reinforce the wisdom about life and death that our faith offers us. This is especially important for widows and widowers who may now be living alone and who really need the support of others to sustain their faith and

their hope.

Beyond such a one-time event, though, planners might also discuss with the bereavement ministry in the parish about efforts to support those who are grieving throughout the year, and especially in the first few months following the funeral. Are there enough such people in the parish to organize a support group to meet on a regular basis? Are there ways to support such people on a one-to-one basis, perhaps asking a parishioner to regularly touch base with the bereaved and maybe to accompany them when they come to Mass? What else might be helpful?

## **Prayers: 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

It's easy to become complacent about life, our faith and our commitments when we are caught up in the demands of daily life. As we approach the end of this liturgical year, we are called to pay attention to what really matters. Today's readings remind us to focus on the bigger picture of eternal life and to question our focus, our energy and how we use our resources. We are called to look away from the superficial and to remember that time is not unlimited. We do not know the day nor the hour when we will be thrust into eternity. How are we preparing for it?

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you told the disciples to be prepared for what is to come: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you taught them how to live wisely in the present: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to live today with tomorrow in mind: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us pray for wisdom and vision as we look to what lies ahead.

**Minister** For the whole church, as we await the fulfillment of Christ's promise of eternal life ... we pray,



- For people throughout the world who need hope in the face of violence, poverty, illness or any kind of insecurity ... we pray,
- For those too busy, too distracted or too cynical to focus on life beyond death ... we pray,
- For the grace to refocus on what matter to us as believers and the courage to take whatever action is needed ... we pray,
- For our children and youth who need faith, hope and confidence for the future ... we pray,
- For the generosity to help those whose future seems bleak, or who do not know how to help themselves ... we pray,
- For the sick, the dying; and those who have died ... (*names*) ... and for all who grieve for them ... we pray,

**Prsider** God of the past, present and future, we ask you to help us look with courage at what lies ahead. Give us the wisdom to live each day as if it were our last. Grant us courage to trust in what is yet to come. We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

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