

**23 Pentecost
November 12, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Our gospel reading this morning is about a wedding with ten bridesmaids. Now that is a fairly large wedding ... not one that little ol' St. Cyprian's could accommodate very easily. In my 40-plus years as a priest I have done lots of weddings, but not too many with ten bridesmaids. However, there was one that had nine bridesmaids, but that was not what made it memorable. Some of you have heard the story, but after the "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today ..." I said, "If any of you can show just cause ..." A man stood up on a pew in the back of the church, held up his fist, and yelled, "I object! I object to this marriage!"

Obviously this interrupted the wedding. I won't bore you with all the details, but it was an ex-boyfriend who felt jilted. He was thrown out ... almost literally ... and when the bride and groom had composed themselves, and all the groomsmen who had chased the protester to the parking lot had returned, the wedding continued ... although somewhat subdued. I asked the question again ... "Does anyone know just cause ..." This time there was no protest. The next question in the marriage service is addressed to the bride and groom: "If either of you know any reason why you may not be married lawfully, and in accordance with God's Word, you do now confess it." You could have heard a pin drop.

When I next updated my resume I included the fact that I had officiated at a wedding where there had been a protest. It is rather rare, but it does happen, I figured I might as well get as much mileage out of it as I could.

For your information: The statement in the wedding service ... "If any of you can show just cause why they may not lawfully be married, speak now; or else for ever hold your peace." ... has nothing to do with jilted lovers. It is an archaic remnant from a time when marriages were arranged, and families would exchange dowries as part of a contract to marry off their children. But sometimes family fortunes changed, and other arrangements would be made, yet these outstanding contracts had to be settled. So, the requirement was to "post the Banns of Marriage" on the church door, and make an announcement in church for three weeks before the wedding. If you are interested there are still instructions for publishing the Banns of Marriage in our Book of Common Prayer on page 437. The statement "If any of you can show just cause ..." in the wedding service itself is the fourth and final publishing of the Banns of Marriage.

All this isn't really relevant to the sermon, but I thought you might find it interesting.

According to Matthew's gospel Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom ... five of them "wise" and five of them "foolish." The five "wise" bridesmaids remembered to take oil for their lamps, while the five "foolish" ones did not. When the groom showed up at midnight the "foolish" bridesmaids had run out of oil for their lamps, and they begged the "wise" bridesmaids to share their oil ... but the "wise" bridesmaids refused to give them any. By the time the "foolish" bridesmaids got back from buying oil the wedding banquet was in full swing and the groom denied them entrance with the dismissive "I do not know you."

Matthew tells us that Jesus told this story as a parable. According to Matthew's account, the kingdom of heaven is like this. Maybe it is, but if that is the case I'm not so sure I want any part of it. I've been too foolish at times in my life. And there have been too many occasions I have stood outside a door and have been denied entrance because I have been judged "foolish." If my advancing age has given me any wisdom at all it is that I now know just how foolish I have been ... in many ways ... in my younger years ... and how foolish I can still be. Also, if there is anything at all that I have learned from my faith, it is that my "foolishness" ... past, present, or future ... is not a barrier to God's forgiveness and love.

Now, if I were to tell the story of the ten bridesmaids, I would change a few things. It would be the same as Matthew's story up until the bridegroom shows up at midnight. Then MY story would say that all the bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish bridesmaids would say to the wise, "Please give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." And I would then change the story so the wise would say to the foolish, "We will share what we have, but their might not be enough for all of us, so let us hurry." Then the bridegroom, when he came, would find some of the bridesmaids with their lamps lit, and others with no flame, and ask, "Why are not all your lamps lit?" When the bridesmaids explained that they had shared their oil, but there had not been enough, the bridegroom would be delighted with their generosity and welcome them all into the wedding banquet! And everyone would live happily ever after.

Now, wouldn't it be just great if we could rewrite the Bible stories to fit our own idea of the way things are supposed to be? The fact is the story is written the way the story is written, even if I don't particularly like it. So what are we to do with it? And, if you are anything like me, I imagine you have had your foolish moments ... maybe ones you really don't want to remember and wish even God would forget ... and you sure hope St. Peter won't hold them against you when you stand at his door.

Let me go back to the wedding where I officiated and had a protester. This all happened back in the 1970's. Had there been stalking laws in effect at that time this ex-boyfriend would have been in jail. I met with the couple after their honeymoon and I learned that on more than one occasion he had followed the bride home from work. He had broken into her house. He had accosted her at a restaurant. AND ... the bride had hid all this from her fiancé until just before the wedding. She even thought the ex-boyfriend might show up at the wedding and protest, so she hired a bouncer ... little good did it do. Anyhow, she and her fiancé did not think it

important enough to tell me about it during their pre-marital counseling. Nine bridesmaids. Obviously this bride was more concerned with her wedding than she was with her marriage.

Why do I tell you this story this morning? Because it is real-life foolishness. Foolishness on the part of the protester. Foolishness on the part of the bride and groom. And even foolishness on my part. In the wisdom I have gained through my foolishness of not asking the correct question I have made it a point ever since to ask every future bride and groom if they think there might be an objection to their marriage. Interestingly, a good number say it just might happen.

But, let's get back to the story in Matthew's gospel. Ten bridesmaids ... five of them wise and five foolish. It is easy to fall into the trap of allegorizing Matthew's story. In the allegory the bridegroom is Jesus Christ. In the allegory, you and I are the bridesmaids waiting for him to come ... some of us "wise" and some of us "foolish." But as darkness draws on, we become drowsy and fall asleep ... we become unconscious. When we are startled awake by the presence of the bridegroom some of us are prepared ... others are not ... and those of us who are prepared are rewarded with a banquet, while those of us who are not are dismissed and denied entrance to salvation. As an allegory we can certainly get the message ... you had better be one of those who is prepared, or you will have hell to pay ... literally.

That is what happens if we read this as an allegory. But I do not believe it is an allegory. I believe it is a parable ... a parabolic story that skirts around the issue, not right at it. The authors of the gospels, especially Luke and Matthew, have a way of adding a moral to these parables as if to explain them. However, I believe, as many scholars believe, that Jesus told parables as a way to engage a conversation ... to begin a discussion.

Ten bridesmaids. The Greek word here for "bridesmaid" is literally "virgin." The story is about ten young women. Maybe five of them didn't get to go to the wedding banquet because they forgot to bring enough oil for their lamps, but maybe next time they will remember. Just maybe these young women, as they mature, might learn from their foolishness.

If I have any wisdom at all in my advancing age it is because of my foolishness in younger years, and the fact that I have been given a second chance. They say that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting a different result each time. Wisdom is knowing that the same foolish behavior will continue to lead to the same result, and in the case of this story it means being denied entrance into the banquet.

The fact is that God forgives our foolishness. When we recognize and acknowledge the foolishness in our lives, and make the choice to change our behavior, we can join the wise ones at the banquet. Matthew would have us believe that we get only one chance to go to the wedding banquet. The larger story, as told in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Gospels, and in Paul's letters, is that God is a forgiving God who wants us to be wise, not foolish. Yes, there are consequences for our foolishness, but we will survive them, and if we can accept God's forgiveness, we just might know some wisdom in our lives.

Almost forty years after that wedding where there was an objection, I would like to imagine that the protester looks back and sees his actions as foolish. I would also hope that he has gained some wisdom in the ensuing decades. As for the couple who were married that day, I have my doubts that they are still married. A marriage that begins in dishonesty and untruths seems jeopardized from the beginning. But, I would hope that the foolishness of the bride and groom has also been the seed of wisdom ... maybe their lives now are better for it. I hope that they can at least laugh about it.

For my foolishness ... in years gone by and in the present moment ... I hope that I see it for what it is. I hope that I can own it, ask and accept forgiveness for it, and move into greater wisdom. God wants us all to live fully in God's image, and even when we falter, God is willing to give us a path for a second chance. It is as true for you as it is for me.

God's forgiveness and love is always available, even ... especially ... to the foolish.

Amen.