

Have you ever noticed how much Jesus liked to talk about weddings? Today’s gospel reading is one example. He tells a story about waiting for the groom to show up. These days that sounds like bad news, but back then, the groom was sometimes delayed because he negotiated with the bride’s family about a gift to give in return for their daughter. Often, the negotiations would be delayed by the bride’s parents as a way of communicating that they thought their daughter was worth more than the groom had offered by his initial gift.

In Jesus’ story, the bridesmaids are waiting through such a delay. But even though the groom was delayed, they were to be ready for his arrival and escort him into the wedding feast. Five of them, however, were not ready. They had time to get the extra oil they needed, but they did not feel the sense of urgency to do it right away. So when the groom arrived they had to rush off to the store to buy more oil. The problem was that when they returned and sought entrance to the feast, they were considered no different than other uninvited people. The feast had started and the doors were locked. It was too late.

All ten girls knew that the groom would come and take them to the wedding feast. They didn’t know exactly when but they knew that no matter how late it got that he would eventually come. It has been pointed out that the girls who took along the extra oil must have looked a bit silly. Weddings took place in the daytime, and at the latest, a groom would arrive early evening. Why lug along extra bottles? Why complicate their lives by preparing for something that’s unlikely to happen? Those girls whom Jesus calls wise could be seen as pessimists, preoccupied with what might go wrong.

But it turns out they were prepared; the others were not. Those who had no oil for their lamps hurried to the store. Remember, it’s midnight. By the time they got the shopkeeper out of bed, it was too late. The door to the wedding feast was shut. They banged on the door but time had run out. They begged to be let in. A voice replies. “Certainly not! I don’t know you.” What a disturbing end to the story! What can we learn from it?.

Before we attempt an answer, here’s another story. A young woman was expecting her boyfriend to show up. She was nicely dressed and waiting patiently. However, by the time he was an hour late, she figured she had been stood up. So, she took off her makeup, put on her pajamas, gathered her snacks and sat down to watch TV. As her favorite show was just coming on, the doorbell rang. It was her boyfriend. He stared at her wide-eyed: “I’m two hours late, and you’re still not ready?”

These stories are about waiting. The one Jesus told is about a delay that is evident in the kingdom of God. From our vantage point, it seems clear that Jesus anticipated our waiting for him would be problematic. Other parts of Scripture talk about why the delay is happening, but this story really doesn’t; just that there will be one before the Groom shows up.

So what is the Kingdom Value being expressed here? Today, we might say it like this. “You had one job.” You’ve heard that, right? These bridesmaids had one job. It was to be found

ready when the Groom finally arrives. Because of a personal desire to honor the Groom, some had prioritized this evening correctly. Others had not, and there were consequences both ways. What I think is key here is that relationship drives the preparedness. The bridesmaids had one job, and those that knew the Groom personally knew how important this occasion was to him and therefore they gave readiness the priority over everything else. Convenience and expense and even rest became less important because the Groom was more important.

So, holy Christian Church, beloved children of God, you have one job. Do you understand it? Do you accept the task entrusted to you?

Jesus is saying, be found ready. Honor God above all other things. Trust Jesus for forgiveness and eternal life; get to know God and his ways by studying Scripture; practice his presence by diligent prayer; and help those who need it. Or to use the imagery of the parable – keeping your lamps lit and ready.

The real gut punch comes at the end of the story. The door to the reception is shut and a voice is heard saying, "I never knew you." This comes across as incredibly harsh, but when you stop to think about it, more than anything it is a statement of fact. He does not say, "I never loved you." "I never called you", "I never drew you to myself." He says, "I never knew you." What is implied is that if the Groom was known by these bridesmaids—up-close-and-personally known, they would've ordered their lives around waiting for Him. Well, why? What would inspire that kind of devotion?

If you accept that this wedding story is meant to describe the waiting that we are doing right now for Jesus' return, then another fact locks into place. This is not the Groom's first appearance. The Groom had to do more than attract his bride. He had to negotiate an exchange to gain her. And what a price it was. He had to pay for all her mistakes, even her lack of faithfulness. In order to secure a future in which they could share love, he was sentenced to die her death. And all this he does willingly because she is his pearl of great price. The redemptive death of Jesus on the cross makes His union with you possible, and if that man, that Groom tells you to wait and be ready, well, what else are you going to say? If you know Him; if you know that you are that loved, that desirable, that He would empty Himself, make himself nothing, and suffer the death penalty for you, instead of you, isn't that someone you could build your life around? Isn't that someone for whom you would wait forever?