

Last week our gospel reading was Jesus' parable of the Wedding Banquet, where a king invites everyone, both good and bad, to come to a feast to celebrate the wedding of his son. The parable had an unexpected ending when the king notices that one guest was not wearing a proper wedding garment. The king responded by telling his servants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

I'm not going to rehash my sermon about that parable (if you missed it and you're curious what I had to say about that, you can pick up a copy of the sermon in the narthex). But one thing that I didn't explore was, where is this place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth? I suppose the most common answer is that we assume that it is a place of despair, another name for hell.

But this past week, I actually discovered this place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth and I spent a little time there myself. It's a group on Facebook called "Narrative Lectionary" where pastors who are using the Narrative Lectionary come to bounce around ideas on how to preach the text for the upcoming Sunday. This past week it has been hysterical to read the posts about this Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids. You can almost hear the weeping and gnashing of teeth emanating from the computer screen. You have to understand that Lutheran pastors have the doctrine of justification by grace imprinted on the very depths of their DNA. It is in our job description that we are to continually proclaim the good news that our relationship with God, our salvation, is totally a gift of God's grace and that we need not, indeed we can not, do anything to earn God's love. Lutheran pastors love Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, who in spite of shaming his father and screwing up his life, is still welcomed home by his father with open arms and a party. Lutheran pastors love Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard that we read two weeks ago, where those who come late and work only one hour get paid the same as those who work all day, because God loves us not because of what we do, but because of who we are – beloved children of God.

But when we Lutheran pastors come to this parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, it's like we short-circuit and everything locks up in our brains. We start stuttering and stammering, trying to find some bit of grace in this story. On the Narrative Lectionary Facebook page, pastors have been pointing out all the things that are "wrong" with this parable, and by wrong I mean the several ways this story is inconsistent with the proclamation of a gracious God who is always ready to forgive our sins.

It's hard to not read this parable as an allegory, where each detail of the story stands for something. In Jewish tradition, marriage was a common metaphor for the relationship between God and the people of Israel – God is the bridegroom and Israel is the bride. So in the early Christian community this metaphor got transferred to the relationship of Christ and the church – Christ is the bridegroom and the church is the bride. But this parable messes this up because the bride isn't even mentioned and it appears that the church is represented by these ten bridesmaids who are waiting for the bridegroom to come.

So we've got the church waiting for Jesus to return and Jesus is delayed, not returning as soon as many were expecting. So what is the church (the followers of Jesus) to do during this time of waiting? Jesus begins the parable by saying half the bridesmaids are wise and half are foolish. What distinguishes them? If you look at the artwork on the cover of the bulletin, that artist thinks the five on the top level were wise because they are awake and the five foolish ones are sleeping. But the artist didn't read the story closely. All ten of them fall asleep, so staying awake and watchful isn't what makes them wise.

Others suggest that having enough oil is the sign of wisdom. Well, what does the oil signify? Faith? Jesus said earlier that if one has the smallest amount of faith or trust, as small as a mustard seed, that would be more than sufficient. (Mt. 17:20) So if the oil is faith, one should not need a lot of it. Maybe the oil signifies good works? At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works." (Mt. 5:16) The only source of light people had in Jesus' time was oil lamps, so having oil in our lamps maybe does have something to do with good works, with following Jesus' teachings. And then at the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says that those who live according to his teachings are like a wise man who builds his house on rock, on a firm foundation, while those who don't live according to his teachings are like a foolish man who builds his house on sand which gets washed away when challenges come. (Mt. 7:24-27) So maybe we're onto something here – the wise person is the one who follows Jesus' teachings by doing good works, which is like letting our lights shine which happens when we have

enough oil. So the five foolish bridesmaids were foolish because they ran out of oil and they weren't doing the good works which were necessary to allow them entrance to the wedding feast.

The only problem with that interpretation is that the foolish ones don't run out of oil. The text says that they trim the wicks on the lamps and the lamps are going out, but it doesn't say the lamps went out. They were still burning.

And then what's up with the five so-called "wise" bridesmaids who bring extra oil? Again in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "Don't be anxious about tomorrow. Trust God to provide for you." (Mt. 6:6:25-34) He tells a parable about a rich man who builds extra barns to hold his surplus of crops so that he'll have plenty for times of drought or famine, and Jesus criticizes him for stockpiling. (Luke 12:20) How is that different from bringing an extra gallon of lamp oil? And don't get me going about how the wise bridesmaids are unwilling to share with those in need! I'll give you a spoiler alert that in next week's parable Jesus criticizes those who don't give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, and clothes to the naked. (Mt. 25:31-46) But it's okay to not give oil to those who need it?

But the worst part of this parable, the part that really gets the Lutheran pastors weeping and gnashing their teeth is to have the foolish bridesmaids show up a little late, knock on the door and say joyfully, "We apologize that we're late. Please forgive our foolishness. But we're here now, ready to party!" only to have the bridegroom look them in the face, say "Sorry, I don't know you!" and shut the door on them. How in the world is that consistent with Jesus' parable of the man who had 100 sheep and one got lost, and he left the 99 behind in order to go out and search for the one that was lost? (Luke 15:3-7) And, I might add, that sheep didn't even have an oil lamp!

You can see the problem this parable poses for Lutheran pastors. So in this Facebook group pastors start coming up with innovative interpretations so that they can force the parable to fit a proper Lutheran understanding of grace. Maybe the bridegroom doesn't represent Christ, suggests one. Maybe the oil doesn't signify good works, but is the power of the Holy Spirit, suggests another (though I don't really see how that helps much). Maybe the reason the five are foolish is not a lack of oil but the fact that they left on a foolish errand (after all, where were they going to find an oil store open at midnight?) If they had just stayed put in the community of believers and not been concerned about how much oil they had, they would have been present when the bridegroom arrived and he would have no doubt let them in with everyone else. They were foolish because they didn't stay put in the church.

I don't post on Facebook very often, but with all the weeping and gnashing of teeth going on, I put in my two cents worth in this discussion. Here's what I said:

I have been struggling with the apparent works righteousness of this text as have so many on the Narrative Lectionary page. Others have pointed out the many difficulties with the text (the wise not sharing, the bridegroom being the source of the problem because of his delay, the lack of grace and the closed door, etc.) I have decided to take the approach that this is a perfect example of the dialectics (paradoxes) that are core to Lutheran theology. My favorite definition of a dialectic is that it is an either/or question answered by a "yes".

- Is Jesus human or divine? Yes.
- Are the commandments a gift with no strings attached or are there consequences for not keeping them? Yes.
- Is the kingdom of God a present reality or a future hope? Yes.

You get the idea. A dialectic takes two seemingly contradictory statements and holds that both of them are true. So is my relationship with God (my salvation) based on what God has done for me (grace) or what I do for God (good works)? Yes. The proper way to deal with a dialectic is not to somehow try to fashion some compromise between the two statements. The proper way to deal with a dialectic is to say that both statements are true and then live with the tension. The parable of the workers in the vineyard from a couple of weeks ago where the latecomers get the same pay as those who worked all day is a parable that emphasizes God's grace. This parable emphasizes the importance of good works and the call to continue to do good works even when the full in-breaking of the kingdom of God is delayed. Both are true! Matthew's gospel is full of passages that emphasize the importance of doing good works, using images of bearing fruit, letting one's light shine, taking up one's cross. There's no need for weeping and gnashing of teeth here. Jesus can embrace the tension of a dialectic, and we can, too. So, are we saved by God's grace or by our good works? Yes!