

Here Comes the Groom!
James 2:14-18 and Matthew 25:1-13
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James 2:14-18 (NRSV)

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

Matthew 25:1-13 (NRSV)

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.

But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'

Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'

But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.'

And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.

Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.'

But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'

Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Sermon

About thirty years ago my high school friend Jenny was to get married in this beautiful tropical garden in Hawaii. It was to be your typical snap-snap-snap blink-and-you-miss-it wedding, so there weren't even chairs for the

guests to sit in. People started arriving...the groom, the photographer, the guests, the parents, the minister, the musicians...but not the bride. This was before cell phones, so there was no way for the groom to contact her. And the bride did not get there, and the bride did not get there, and the bride did not get there.

You should have seen the different reactions from the people standing around waiting. Everyone was wondering when in the world Jenny would arrive. Or if she would arrive! Some folks got mad at her; some tried to make the best of it; some just stood around twiddling their thumbs.

Just when it seemed that she would never get there, the limo pulled up. More than an hour late. Turns out the hair salon had double booked Jenny's appointment. Needless to say, there was a collective sigh of relief when the ceremony got started. It was awkward, and a bit scary, but it all turned out for the best.

In our passage from Matthew this morning, Jesus tells a story about a delay in a wedding, and there are parts of it that are awkward, and a bit scary too.. In Matthew 25, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to the situation of a bunch of bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom.

Weddings back in Jesus' time had a lot of things similar to today—lots of prescribed etiquette, formal invitations, dress codes, luxurious banquets. One thing that was different, though, was role of the groom. Let's face it. The groom is not exactly the most important part of a wedding day. We've got the bride, the mother of the bride—well, maybe the mother of the bride and then the bride—the bridesmaids, the flower girls, the ring bearer, the guest book attendant, and then the groom down there at the bottom, tied with the pastor as

least important people on a wedding day. My mom told my brother-in-law when he married my sister, “All you have to do is show up in a tux.”

In Jesus’ time, however, the groom had the big role. He was the star of an elaborate procession. They might as well have sung, “Here comes the groom!” He would parade to his parents’ home, where the bride and all her attendants were waiting. Then there would be the ceremony, and then a week-long feast.

This parable apparently takes place just before the ceremony and the feast. The groom’s on his way to meet the bridesmaids at his parents’ home. Well, he’s supposed to be on his way, but the problem is that he’s delayed. Really delayed. It’s more than just a hair salon double-booking, because this groom doesn’t show up until midnight. A great shout awakens the sleeping bridesmaids. “Here comes the groom!” Five of the bridesmaids have brought some extra oil for their lamps. The other five are forced to go find a 24-hour oil dealer, and by the time they return, they have been shut out of the party.

The parable is an allegory, which Jesus uses to give us one perspective on how to get to heaven. The groom represents Christ, and his delay is the time Christians have to wait before he comes back again. The marriage feast represents heaven, and the closed door is the last judgment, with some brought in and some left out. The bridesmaids represent all of us, living our lives waiting for Jesus to come back. There’s not much difference between them. They’re all dressed alike, they’re all about the same age, they’re all virgins, they even all fell asleep.

That means the most important thing in the parable is the oil. The oil! The ones who had it when the groom came were wise; the ones who didn’t were foolish. The wise ones were ready to go when the groom came. The foolish

ones were not. The wise ones went into the banquet. The foolish ones did not. The only difference was the oil. //

Makes me wonder just what the oil represents. After all, if having it or not having it makes the difference between going to heaven or getting shut out, it makes a big difference what it is.

Commentators disagree on exactly what it might represent. Some say it's faith, others piety or love. A lot of people say that it's good works. I was pretty sure that's what I thought too. But then I went to the women's Wednesday Bible study and they convinced me of something better.

They convinced me that the best way to think of the oil is as faith and works put together. Faith that God has forgiven us in Jesus Christ, and works that show that our faith is real. One woman in the study said that we might think of the oil as faith, and the flame as our works—what we do to live out our faith. Take a look at that stained glass window and see the lamp--you can't have a flame without the oil, and without the flame the oil isn't going to light up a room, either.

Sometimes I think we fall into the trap of thinking that it's what we DO that gets us into heaven. I remember a friend from high school who said that he believed that life is a series of plusses and minuses—plusses for every good thing you do and minuses for every bad thing. At the end of your life, if you have more plusses, you get to go to heaven. At least that's what his belief system said.

But that's not at all what Christianity says! Our faith tells us that while we were still sinners, Jesus died for us. We are saved by grace, through faith—a gift that we do not have to earn. We don't have to get more plusses than

minuses; what we have to do is understand what Jesus has done for us and accept that gift for ourselves. So the oil can't be works without faith...that'll never get us into heaven.

But the oil can't be faith without works, either! Believing in God without living out those beliefs isn't going to get us to heaven. James tells us that faith without works is dead. We need to put what we believe into action!

Sometimes we reduce Christianity to a simple list of ideas that we agree with intellectually... without letting those beliefs impact the way we live our lives at all. We believe in God the Father almighty—check. The maker of heaven and earth—check. In Jesus Christ his only son our Lord—check. That's good enough to get us into the feast, right?

Uh, no. The kind of faith that saves us is the kind of faith that changes us, so that we live out our faith with works.

The foolish bridesmaids' have to know enough about lamps to know they need to have oil. What they believe matters. But they actually have to get the oil too! What they do matters. Having works and deeds together is what matters when they hear that cry, "Here comes the groom!"

For the bridesmaids, that shout signaled the end of the game. When they heard it, they had to be ready, then, at that moment, because that's when they found out if they were prepared. It was the time when everything came to a head. It was final... permanent. Some got to go to the feast, and some were shut out.

Someday we're going to hear that voice, too, "Here comes the groom!" It'll be that moment when we'll see if our lives demonstrate a faith that leads to

works. “Here comes the groom!” One day it will be a shout, and it will be final.

But meantime, we can hear voices whispering to us, warning us that the groom is coming. They’re not quite shouts, and they’re not yet final. When I lived in Atlanta, one day I decided to take the bus to the symphony. I found out not too many people in Atlanta take the bus to the symphony. To a baseball game, lots. To the downtown university, tons. To the symphony, well, that night, one. There were only two other passengers on the bus. One kept to herself in the back; the other was babbling non-stop.

He looked like he was probably homeless, and certainly impaired. I could hardly understand a word he said. I finally looked up and made out what I think he was saying: “Just give me a dollar.” I thought about my policy never to give money to anyone begging. I thought about getting off the bus with him, and stopping to buy him some food. To be honest, I didn’t think of how I could do a lot more to fight homelessness or serve the urban poor. I don’t think my beliefs about how God wants us to fight for justice for everyone even came up at all. I don’t think I thought much about faith, or about works, that night.

What I did think about that night was how much I had paid for the symphony tickets, and how late I was running...and how annoyed I was that he kept mumbling at me. We finally got to Symphony Hall and I rushed off, doing nothing, his slurring voice echoing in my ears.

Today I wonder if I misunderstood him completely. Now I don’t think he was saying “Just give me a dollar.” I think it was much deeper than that. He was really whispering, “Here comes the groom!”

Maybe you've heard it too. It's not yet a shout, but a whisper. It reminds us under its breath that faith without works is dead. I hear it when I watch the market go up and up and up and the dollar signs start flashing in my eyes. You know it--it's the soft voice that comes when you're tempted to pass along some gossip, "Here comes the groom." When we give into pressure to do something unethical at work, "Here comes the groom." When we don't even stop to think about the best way to address the migrants coming to our borders, "Here comes the groom."

The still small voice. It's not yet a shout. But it's building up to that. Each time we hear it, it tells us that Christ really is coming back, and we really do need to be ready. The shout is coming, and when we hear that final cry, we'll learn whether our faith and our works go together in order to save us.

 But...if we let these whispers change us...if we put our faith in Christ and live it out with works, then this shout "Here comes the groom!" isn't a warning. It's a promise, a wonderful invitation to go inside to the wedding banquet...to the celebration that God prepares for us.

When I think about my friend Jenny's wedding, of course I remember how late she was for the ceremony. But more than that, I remember the reception...how good the food was, how beautiful the hall was, how great it was to be with people who loved her so much. But most of all, I remember her dancing with her dad. Her husband wasn't much of a dancer, so I remember her in her dress, him in his tux, forgetting about the big delay earlier in the day. It was so graceful—he guided her all around the floor, while the guests cheered them on. Gently, lovingly gliding from side to side, with broad smiles and tears of joy, waltzing around the floor, thinking only about how much they loved each other, and how glad they were to be together, and how thrilling it was that the wedding feast had finally come. Amen.