

November 12, Ordinary 32A (Matthew 25:1-13)

Even the wise bridesmaids have limited vision.

by [Audrey West](#) in the [October 25, 2017](#) issue

There is no doubt. It is better to build one's house on a rock than on sand, better to be the servant who is placed in charge of the estate than the one who is punished when the householder returns, better to be ready than not.

It is better to be wise than foolish. But sometimes it is tough to tell the difference.

Few people would choose to identify with the five foolish women in the parable of the ten bridesmaids. When their lamps sputter out, they have no means to light the path for the bridegroom. They assume that oil for their own lamps is the most important thing, so they run off in the middle of the night to buy more. This decision removes them from the scene just as they are called to do their part: to remain with the bridegroom as he enters into the feast.

Jesus calls them foolish—*morai* in the Greek, root of today's offensive epithet *moron*. When these foolish ones finally reappear, after the feast has already begun, no one hearing the parable is surprised to learn that they have trouble getting through the door.

It is easy to point fingers when faith in our own effort renders others unworthy. The foolish ones should have known better! Surely the festivities were a topic of conversation, with speculations about the menu, guest list, and so on. They had time to learn their duties as companions of the hosts. They should have gone to the market to stock up on supplies, just in case. They should have planned ahead.

At the same time, a well-practiced procrastinator such as myself can imagine a similar predicament. I can push a deadline so far into the future that it falls right off the calendar. That project due to my employer by the first of the year? I have plenty of time. That phone call to my senator? I will take care of it later. That emergency kit for the trunk of the car? Maybe I'll put it together next month. The eschatological return of the Messiah? Oh yeah, well, it has been so long already, I bet there is still

time to live like it matters.

Perhaps the bridesmaids would have been better prepared for a delay if they had remembered this groom's proclivity for enlarging his circle of connections. All reports suggest the sort of Messiah who would stop along the way to dine with sinners, talk to a foreigner, or heal a person with leprosy.

One time he even paused at the side of a mountain to assure people (to their faces, no less!) of God's blessing, despite the world's insistence otherwise. The mourners, the meek, the merciful; the persecuted, the peacemakers, the poor in spirit: together with all who hunger and thirst for righteousness, these are recipients of God's favor. If the bridesmaids had thought about it at all, they probably could have guessed that a commitment to outreach would delay this bridegroom once again.

The wise bridesmaids, for their part, must have read up on emergency preparations for wedding feasts. Not only do they bring oil inside their lamps, they each carry a spare flask, too, which is basically the only thing they get right. But they seem proud of this accomplishment—proud enough to grasp it with clenched fists and refuse to let go. When the foolish sisters ask them to share, their answer is swift: there's not enough; go buy your own. Their response reveals the insidious assumption that there is only so much oil—so much good—to go around. Their lamps are lit, but their vision is limited.

This fear of losing blinds the so-called wise bridesmaids to the truth that by hoarding the oil, they diminish the event. Five lamps at full strength provide no more light than ten lamps at half strength. But five extra people at the party would almost surely result in a more substantial celebration.

Furthermore, the women act as if it were possible to purchase the most important thing with their private resources. Their behavior reminds me of the words of a Tanzanian friend: "In the United States, you can buy what you need, so it is easy to become distracted by your wealth. In Tanzania, we have no money. We can depend on nothing but God."

Throughout the parable, the behavior of the bridesmaids (wise or foolish) is so poor, one wonders how they managed to wrangle an invitation to the wedding in the first place. Not one of them deserves to enter through the door with the bridegroom. The wise women are selfish, while the foolish ones run off just when they should be present to welcome the groom. All of them operate on the mistaken belief that the

most important thing about the procession is the oil, instead of the celebration itself. And like the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, all of them fail at their fundamental charge by falling asleep in the first place.

What sets the wise bridesmaids apart from the foolish is not the presence or absence of extra oil, but whether or not they remain in the company of the bridegroom. All ten could have walked through that door together. Imagine the celebration that could have been.