

Hespeler, 8 November, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Amos 5:18-24, Psalm 70, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25:1-13

Do you remember the last time you got invited to a wedding? I realize, of course, that it's been a while now since things like weddings have been celebrated in a normal way so you may have to cast your memory a long way back, but surely you remember.

And do you remember the part of the wedding when there were a bunch of virgins (I know that the word that is used in the New Revised Standard Version is "bridesmaids," but the Gospel text actually only says *virgins* in the original language) – a bunch of virgins whose job it was to wait around at the bridegroom's house for him to bring his new bride home and, well, nudge, nudge, wink, wink, you know what I mean? And they were supposed to greet the couple with bright lamps and happy smiles.

And do you know how it sometimes used to happen that the bride and the groom got delayed for hours with all the feasting and drinking and well-wishing and some of the virgins who hadn't planned ahead and brought some extra oil for their lamps would run out and how funny it would be when they had to leave and go buy some more oil and they weren't there when the couple actually arrived and ended up missing the whole party? Oh, remember how we used to laugh when that happened? Oh, foolish, foolish virgins!

What, you don't remember that? Oh man, I'm glad. I thought I was losing it! I thought that this pandemic had been going on so long that I'd completely forgotten what a normal wedding looked like. So I am not the only one who is really struggling to make sense of that parable from the Gospel of Matthew about the ten virgins at the wedding? I mean, obviously Jesus was trying to make a point by telling that parable. But the wedding customs that he referred to – customs that all of the people in the crowd who heard him tell that parable could understand without thinking about it – are just plain weird to us.

So it seems to me that I have two options if I want to help people understand this parable of Jesus. I could spend a lot of time explaining ancient wedding customs so we could get the point. The only problem with that is that I can't really say that I understand what the customs were. I'm not sure anybody can because the wedding customs of ancient peasants are not generally the kind of thing that get written down in ancient sources.

So I'm going to take another option. I'm going to try and see if I can retell



The Parable of the
Ten Virgin Voters

Jesus' parable within a system and some customs that we already understand.

It was election night and the ten voters settled down in front of their television to watch the election results. They were, all of them, first time voters. They had never voted in an election before but, in each case, something had made them resolve to actually participate in the process this year. So I guess that you might call them ten political virgins.

And five of these political virgins were completely naïve about the whole election process. They figured that this whole process of counting the ballots and declaring the winners couldn't possibly take much time at all. If the local polling place closed at 9:00 p.m., then surely everything would be settled by, what, 9:05? Surely 9:30 or 10:00 on the outside! So these foolish voters didn't exactly plan for a long night. A bag of chips and one can of coke was all they brought to get them through the night.

And, of course, they had brought their phones with which they expected to live tweet all of their reactions to the fast-breaking developments as they happened. And, just to make sure, they had charged their phones all the way up until the batteries were almost like three quarters full.

But the other five voters, even if it was their first time, were at least well versed in election processes and informed about how things were supposed to work. They knew about the intricacies of the electoral college. They had informed themselves and knew that a lot of people had voted differently this year and that it would likely take longer to count all of the mail in and the absentee ballots and even, in some places, the early votes.

They also knew that, though it might soon be very clear who had won the popular vote, that actually didn't matter at all. So, having been warned that things might be close in some places and that it might take a very long time for anyone to know who actually won, they were ready to be in it for the long haul.

So what did they bring? What didn't they bring? They had chips and cheezies and popcorn of all flavours. There were coffee and energy drinks to keep them going through the slow times. They had also brought some special drinks that they were going to use for a drinking game they had designed. You know, "Every time somebody mentions voter fraud, take a drink. Every time somebody mentions voter intimidation take another. Another for every lawsuit and so on." And that, really, was only just the beginning. These people had brought so many supplies and such a wealth of snacks and comfort food that it was piled high upon the coffee table.

And as for their cell phones, they had not only charged them all the way to the top, they had brought dozens and dozens of power banks ready to plug in as needed. Oh, they had so much that it was almost ridiculous. And, yes, the foolish virgins did indeed laugh at these wise ones who had brought so

much to sustain them. But the wise ones smiled and shrugged and said, “Let’s just wait and see who looks foolish when all is said and done.”

Now, I don’t mean to get into talking about how, exactly, these ten virgins chose to vote. That is their business. They had not all voted the same way. Let’s just say that about four and a half of them voted one way and five and a half the other. And let’s say that there were wise and foolish who voted both ways, for they voted for their own reasons and according to their own understanding. But let us also note that they all, in their virgin political innocence, believed in the importance of what they had participated in. They believed, in fact, that the future of their country, of democracy and perhaps of civilization itself was riding on the results that they were now waiting to hear. So they were understandably impatient to hear what the results would be.

And so they waited and watched. It was a long evening which was then followed by what seemed to be an even longer night and then a day that was simply interminable. And even then – after many a moment of hope followed by a new depth of despair, peppered with many bursts of anger and frustration – after all of that, it seemed that nothing was really resolved.

Eventually, the five foolish voters looked up. Their one bag of chips lay empty on the floor and their can of coke, long drained had been crumpled in disgust by someone who had been completely scandalized by something that some talking head had said on a panel. They had twitted and tweeted until their thumbs were blistered, but now their phones were languishing at 3% charge. They were hungry, exhausted and strung out. They were done.

And so the five foolish voters went to the five wise voters and said, “You guys have so much. You have snacks and drinks and you still have lots of full power banks. Maybe if you would just share a little bit from all of this bounty that you have, maybe we will be able to hold on until we learn the news that will save us all.” But the wise virgins said no. They said that if they were to give what they had prudently brought to carry themselves through until the results were known, there would not be enough for everybody.

Now this angered the foolish virgin voters more than anything that had happened yet. And they stood up and said, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take this anymore. Let’s just put an end to this right now. If we were just to stop counting the votes, this never-ending nightmare could be over.” And so they went out and went to the Supreme Court and argued with them saying, “It doesn’t matter if they haven’t finished counting the votes of people who voted in certain ways, we just can’t stand waiting anymore. Make it all stop and give us an answer now.” And so they argued and argued and argued and time continued to pass.

Meanwhile, back in front of the television, the wise virgin voters continued to wait for something to happen – something that would indicate

to them that there was some reason to hope that their lives could mean more than a mere scramble to survive in a covid infected, largely dysfunctional world.

And then, at some point, while those foolish virgins were off making their arguments, it happened. What happened? Well, there were *some* developments towards identifying a winner, but it was not really that. There were some close races that began to resolve, but it was not that. No, it was rather that, as these things were going on, the wise voters began to realize that if the kingdom of heaven was going to come, it was going to have to come in them. And they went into an inner room and shut the door. They began to plan, whether or not they had the support of this party or that party, this leader or that one, they would see that kingdom come.

And while they were there in that inner room with the doors locked, the foolish voters who thought that the only thing that mattered was who won and who lost, returned. And they cried out to the wise virgins locked in the inner room and they asked to be part of what they were doing, but those in the inner room cried out and said, "Go away for you would not understand the commitment we have made." And so the foolish voters remained in the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth and everyone is perpetually condemned to wait and think that maybe, in the next election, there will finally be salvation.

Jesus' Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins is one of many he seems to have told to encourage people to wait and to be prepared. He says that, by reflecting on this story, we should be able to find out what the kingdom of heaven is. I love these parables, but I struggle to understand exactly what it is that we are supposed to be waiting for and what it actually means to be prepared.

It is hard enough, of course, when you have a parable like this one that makes cultural assumptions that we really know nothing about. But, in recent American political events, we saw a situation unroll where there was a great need for patience and anticipatory waiting in which we could perhaps finally understand how hard waiting can be.

So, my question is this. I think we have just lived through some events that do well illustrate the kind of waiting that Jesus was talking about in this parable. So where, in what we just lived through, is the kingdom of heaven? My personal opinion is that it is not to be found in this candidate or that one, in this party or that. But I still believe that there is a bridegroom and that, if we remain prepared in the right ways, he will come. And, as for time, it will take what it takes.