

Bridesmaids
Michael Battle
Trinity Church Boston
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Lectionary: Ephesians 4:17-5:2, Psalm 78:1-7, Matthew 25:1-13

In the comedy movie, *Bridesmaids*, Annie (played by Kristen Wiig), has a rough time being a bride's maid, even more so, being the maid of honor for her best friend Lillian (played by Maya Rudolph). From this movie, I have 3 favorite scenes (at least that I can quote in a sermon—the squatting in a wedding dress in the middle of Manhattan made me laugh until I cried).

This first quotable scene represents the typical family tensions when someone gets married. Lillian sums up the family's anxiety with this simple question to her maid of honor. Lillian asks, "Annie, why can't you be happy for me, and then go home and talk about me behind my back like a normal person?"

In the same vexing tone of saying out loud what many feel in private, Jesus' parable of the Bridesmaids in Matthew's Gospel makes us admit the destructive path we often travel. Jesus only tells this parable in Matthew. Perhaps this is because, Matthew really was a tax collector, one of the most despised identities in the first century. Feeling despised, fits Lillian's character as well as five of the characters in Jesus' parable.

In Trinity Church's Wednesday morning Bible Studies, I mentioned that this parable puts the reader into a kaleidoscope of urgency and anxiety. In other words, Jesus' parables are not meant to tell us what to do, how to do it, also, what to feel and how to feel; rather, they are stories that invite our immediate concerns to emerge so that we can understand them more consciously. The kaleidoscopic effect of this particular parable is meant to invite our anxieties to emerge around judgment. There is an urgency in knowing that we are being judged. Time is running out resulting in potential, catastrophic consequences for our communities. What must become conscious in this parable, is to know the current path we are on, where it leads, why it leads there, and what must be done to mitigate the consequences. This parable is about the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids. But it could be just as well the parable of Jimmy Stewart's character, George Bailey, when he becomes conscious of who really is in *It's a Wonderful Life* or Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. So, the particular parable of the Bridesmaids is meant to invite our anxieties around being judged to emerge, and not to run away from them.

Let me first offer a word of caution. The issue of urgent judgement in theology these days is often dysfunctional, similarly expressed in the movie *Bridesmaids*. So, here is the second quotable Bridesmaid's scene, coming this time from Officer Rhodes (played by Chris O'Dawd), a sage like character who leans over to Lillian, the extremely troubled bridesmaid at this point in

the movie and asks: "Do you want to tell a cop about it? . . . [Officer Rhodes continues,] We're just like priests except we would tell everybody afterwards."

Like the conscious duplicity of Officer Rhodes, branches of Christianity over recent centuries have become dysfunctionally fixated on judgment only oriented to the afterlife. A Christian sense of urgency now is dysfunctionally understood as avoiding the eternal violence of hell in the afterlife. I grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina and the incessant question I was asked was, do I have a personal relationship with Jesus because if I didn't I was going to hell. I was never asked, do I have a communal relationship with Jesus, only a personal relationship with Jesus which provides the excuse to focus on the afterlife for me as an individual and makes salvation for the world that God loves, unintelligible in the here and now. There seems to be a foregone conclusion in many branches of Christianity that God does not love the world, only select private individuals.

I remember my theology class with Rowan Williams. We were discussing the changing worldview of Christianity concerning the end times. Somehow Nikolai Berdyaev, the Russian theologian came up in our classroom discussion when we talked about hell. Berdyaev was provocative in recounting his insomnia concerning hell. He stayed up all night worrying about hell. His anxiety was summed up in the question, how could he be in heaven, conscious that someone else was in hell? I remember raising my hand in class, trying to impress Rowan Williams, and I said, "You know some people's concept of heaven is based upon knowing your enemies are weeping and gnashing their teeth forever. Knowing that they are eternally cast out into the utter darkness."

Our parable puts it this way, "And while they [the foolish Bridesmaids] went to buy [lamp oil], the bridegroom came, and those who were ready (the wise Bridesmaids) went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other [foolish] 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."

My last favorite scene from Bridesmaids is when Annie, the Maid of honor, boards a plane. She is enebriated and keeps moving from her economy class to first class, even opening the curtains to First Class. "I'm gonna leave this (curtain) open!" she says, Cause, it's called civil rights! This is the 90s!" After multiple (hilarious) attempts to sit in first class, she's forced back to her cheaper seat- but not before saying her peace.

Annie says to the flight attendant, "Whatever you say, Stove."

The flight Attendant says nonanxiously, "Steve."

Annie: "Stove, what kind of name is that?"

Flight Attendant: "That's not a name - my name is Steve."

Annie: "Are you an appliance?"

Flight Attendant Steve: "No I'm a man."

Annie: "You're a flight attendant."

Flight Attendant: "That's absolutely accurate."

This last quote shows how Annie, who gets little respect, takes it out on the flight attendant who she in turn disrespects, even to the point of asking, "Are you an appliance?"

I believe to interpret the parable of the Bridesmaids through the personal religion in which I grew up in Raleigh, invites the idolatry of treating God like Santa Claus and each other like an appliance for my personal use.

The power of this parable is in how Jesus makes us say out loud what many feel in private—namely, if we're not careful, the current path many religious folks are on is one of destruction, and an absence of light. Howard Thurman, in his book *Deep River*, writes, "By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight the slave undertook the redemption of a religion that the master had profaned in his midst."¹ To say that someone can redeem religion seems incredible, wrapped in hubris and judgment, but it made sense to Thurman's perspective of the Civil Rights Movement in which a dominant race and culture saw other human beings as appliances. His wisdom was in how the fundamental worldview of ultimate freedom had to mesh with the work for the redemption of the Christian religion. In his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman did the same through his interpretation of Jesus and how Jesus made central the healing of the world. So, for Thurman, the damnation of a Christian religion occurred in the profanity of being intertwined with white supremacy.

I believe today redeeming the Christian religion also involves shifting the focus from the afterlife to this life. This does not mean there is no heaven (I so believe in heaven), but it means this life here on earth, matters. It means God loves those we often hate. Many Christians (I still believe they are trying to be Christians) will resist what I'm saying here. **But the dysfunction of violence in the entire world family raises its ugly head when we create hell on earth and then focus on the afterlife to find our salvation.**

The parabolic effect of Jesus' parables is one in which the first will be last and the last will be first. Our baptismal call as Christians is not to focus upon being raptured away from the misery of the world. Our focus, directed by Jesus is to answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

This sermon is not about doom and gloom; rather, in many ways it is about the joy of believing the God that Jesus reveals. This joy contains the Christian conscious recognition of how God took the form a baby, refusing to resort to violence to save the world. And as we approach Advent, we believe God keeps coming to us in such vulnerability—not in the contagious nature of violence. We must hold on to this revelation of God if we are to understand what the parable of the Bridesmaids is saying to us, namely, that the one who comes to judge is the same as the

¹ Howard Thurman, *Deep River: The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Friends United Press), 2005

one willing to be crucified so that we do not only see the light but we can join the light, so that we become lamps full of oil.

As we confess our sins, let us remember only human beings expel themselves. In the case of the so called five “foolish” bridesmaids, perhaps, they just didn’t trust the bridegroom and just join the party. Instead, they ran away to get oil, maybe because they thought they weren’t good enough to get in without the oil. We know better, don’t we? No one is an appliance. By creating us, God declares us all good.

This approach seems to carry the same theme of the parable of the Talents which immediately follows the parable of the Bridesmaids. “Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so, I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. (Matthew 25: 24,25). Maybe, the secret to the parable of the Bridesmaids is that we do not need to go and find oil to fill our lamps but that we simply need to transform into light itself.

A disciple once came to Abba Joseph, saying, “Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, my little fast, and my little prayer. And according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my mind of all evil thoughts and my heart of all evil intents. Now, what more should I do?” Abba Joseph rose up and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He answered, “Why not be totally changed into fire?”²

So, here is the judgment we often run away from. When Jesus was not telling parables, he said in his Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world. . . . No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house” (Mt. 5:14-16). So, Jesus’ kingdom of heaven is not just for five Bridesmaids who have themselves together. No, Jesus’ heaven is for all of us. And may God help us not to block the light.

Jesus didn’t come to save us from a violent and capricious God; rather, God who is love, sent Jesus to save us from our own violence, from our own hells.

² (From Richard Foster’s Book, Prayer)