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What Jewish father in Jesus' day would ever even consider letting his daughter camp out waiting for a groom to arrive for a wedding celebration? That was a worse idea than an unsupervised sleepover! Some smart-aleck in the crowd must have told Jesus, "The foolish ones were the families who let their daughters go out alone at night!"

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wisdom 6:12-16

Psalms 63

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

The parable of the five foolish and five wise virgins waiting for the wedding party is a very odd story. We're now reading the final chapters of Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus is preparing people for the end times. So, he tells the story about the wise and foolish maidens. How can it be that nobody bats an eye at the fact that all the ladies in waiting are napping when the groom arrives? Staying awake is clearly not the point.

The realistic cultural image behind this story would have the 10 virgins in question waiting at the bride's house, safely inside when they fell asleep and their lamps went out. They would have been planning to participate in the wedding procession that carried the flame from the bride's family hearth to the home she was going to share with her new husband. That image throws a different light on the parable.

This parable is about being prepared. Taking the story at face value, we can guess that the wise virgins were the ones who knew and cared about what they were doing. They wanted to be a part of the celebration and did everything necessary to be able to participate fully. It didn't matter that they fell asleep; they were confident that whenever it started they would be ready — they had no worries to interfere with their siesta.

What about the others? What characterizes them as foolish? In Matthew 7, foolish people are the ones who heard Jesus' words and didn't bother to act on them. That sounds a lot like not bothering to procure the oil you'll need to relight your torch. The sleep of the foolish just might have been a sign of their general apathy. Their paltry preparation matched their lack of passion for the event itself. They were along for the ride; if the trip got too costly, they could find other diversions — that's how they had lived their lives.

That much may be clear, but parts of this story sound seriously non-evangelical. Why wouldn't the wise virgins share what they had with the others? Why did the groom refuse to let the latecomers in?

Jesus had said that wisdom consists in putting his words into practice. The wise young women's oil symbolized their store of experience of living the Gospel. Their discipleship prepared them to enjoy the party that was to come. Living the Gospel is not like hoarding oil or packing a backpack. It's more like riding a bike, learning a new language or being generous. You practice until it comes naturally. For the foolish to beg "lend us some of your oil of preparation" was as absurd as saying "Give me a bit of your balance so I can ride this bike." There are some things every person must do for themselves, and no amount of example from others can make up for their lack of action.



(Mark Bartholomew)

That brings us to the second questionable part of the parable. Why wouldn't the groom allow them in? For the simple fact that they weren't there for the party that was going on. Like the guy who showed up at the wedding feast without a festive garment, they didn't belong. Using the analogy above, it would be like saying "We're having a party to celebrate with everyone who learned Spanish this year! There's going to be great food, and all the conversation and entertainment will be in Spanish!" When a group rings the bell and asks to come in to give a lecture in Swahili or Latin, they'll be turned away. They are simply not there for the celebration that is going on.

Some people tend to interpret this parable to show how many foolish people will be locked out of God's reign. That contradicts the way Jesus talked and acted. Jesus was all about opening the doors and getting everyone to enjoy the party. The caveat is that it is God's party that we're invited to enjoy — with absolutely everyone who cares enough to participate. The only requirement for admission is to hear the

invitation and act like we want to be a part of it.

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[Mary M. McGlone, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, is writing the history of the St. Joseph sisters in the U.S.]

Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a worship and homiletic resource. Request a sample issue at CelebrationPublications.org.

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