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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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“You know neither the day nor the hour” (Matt 25:13)

The parable of the 10 virgins (or bridesmaids) depicts a wedding feast awaiting the arrival of the groom, perhaps a procession of one family journeying to the village where the bride’s family lives with some uncertainty or delay possible requiring a vigil that stretches into the night. The focus is on the importance of having enough oil for the lamps used to greet the groom. In the story, five of the virgins have extra oil and five do not. The five without enough oil are locked out of the wedding.

It is a sad ending for a wedding, and the harsh words of the groom and ungenerous spirit of the virgins who get into the feast put an edge on what should be a joyful event. Why couldn’t the five wise virgins with extra oil have shared some of their oil with their sisters? Why was the groom so adamant that the foolish virgins be excluded?

Several of the parables at the end of Matthew’s Gospel have this tension, which suggests that they are actually about the delay in the second coming of the risen Jesus and the emphasis on being prepared and alert, with real consequences for those who are not. In another wedding parable, guests who refuse to come are punished and a guest without a wedding garment is thrown out. Perhaps the oil the bridesmaids need is an anointing that cannot be shared or purchased—a faith relationship with Jesus that is the essence of salvation. The door is narrow, so do not delay or arrive either encumbered or lacking in essentials.

Allegorizing the original parables of Jesus limits their access to the perfect, the prepared and the worthy disciples in contrast to the usual sinners and second-

chance failures Jesus seemed eager to welcome during his ministry. The parables come down to us in layers that reveal the needs of the faith communities a generation after the Christ event. They come to us two millennia later, a living Word that must to be discerned and applied now.

So the message of urgency and remaining alert is valid. Being spiritually awake is a starting point, not extra credit. Prayer opens us to God's presence so a relationship can form and deepen, and it cannot happen suddenly if we neglect the basics.

The best way to assure your place at the wedding is to fall in love. That is the oil of gladness that makes it all happen. And this grace is always available to us if we seek it. But know that the day is today and the hour is now.

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