

Under the category 'Children are so honest.' While I sat in the reception area of my doctor's office, a woman rolled an elderly man in a wheelchair into the room. As she went to the receptionist's desk, the man sat there, alone and silent. Just as I was thinking I should make small talk with him, a little boy slipped off his mother's lap and walked over to the wheelchair. Placing his hand on the man's, he said, "I know how you feel. My Mom makes me ride in the stroller too."

As a woman was nursing her baby, her cousin's 6-year-old daughter, Krissy, came into the room. Never having seen anyone breast feed before, she was intrigued and full of questions about what the woman was doing. After mulling over the answers, Krissy remarked, "My mom has some of those, but I don't think she knows how to use them."

A woman was out bicycling one day with her 8-year-old granddaughter, Carolyn. The grandmother became a little wistful. "In 10 years," she said, "You'll want to be with your friends and you won't go walking, biking, and swimming with me like you do now." Carolyn shrugged. "In 10 years, you'll be too old to do those things anyway."

OK, background time. In first century Palestine, the bride and bridesmaids would wait at the bride's parents' home on the evening of the wedding. The groom would then come with his entourage to escort the bride and her entourage, with music and dancing, to the site of the wedding. The exact timing was unpredictable – because there were many preparations – and the bride's relatives had to haggle over the value of the gifts the groom's family would give to them as her dowry. The more haggling, the more valuable, the more honor, for the family of the bride. That's WHY the bridesmaids needed to stay ready. No this particular groom was delayed more than usual, but a groom would normally come after dark to escort the bride to the wedding. Women could be married in their early to mid-teens; the bridesmaids were normally virgins who would want to perform their duties well, as they hoped to find husbands themselves soon.

The small lamps of this period could be held in a hand, contained only a limited amount of oil, and emitted only a limited amount of light. More likely in view here are torches, which characterized night weddings throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. In poorer villages the torches might be simple oil-soaked rags wrapped around sticks, some suggest that these sticks would need to be rewrapped every 15 minutes or so.

The wedding ceremony – and banquet – were normally at the groom's parents' home. The couple were expected to consummate the marriage that night – but the wedding banquet would last for several days – often 7. The new couple would normally stay at the home of the groom's parents, sometimes in a room on top of the roof, until the groom could secure housing for him and his new bride.

When the foolish bridesmaids finally return with their oil, they ask that the door be opened to them. The door could be bolted with visitors coming and going; it would not be bolted for the entirety of the wedding celebration (remember it could last up to 7 days). But it was bolted against the unwise bridesmaids' negligence – which has insulted the couple and the other participants in the wedding. Once again, we see how this honor-shame-based culture is part of the background of so many of Jesus' stories. The foolish bridesmaids are even told "I do not know you." This was a form of repudiation, the purpose of which was to treat the hearers as strangers. Most of the community would be welcome at the feast; the 5 foolish virgins, however, were now alienated from their own community. In a culture where your identity was about the

GROUP, not the individual, this would have been a terrible punishment – it is meant to get our attention. (from CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS STUDY BIBLE, p. 1678)

Second, so what could this possibly have to say to us? Immediately after Christ's death and resurrection, it was understood that the eschaton – the final coming of Christ would be imminent. By the time Matthew was written – around 85 AD – over 50 years after Jesus' ascension -- people were growing weary of waiting. Matthew used this story to caution his community about becoming complacent in their practice of the faith. So the parable stresses being patient, responsible and active stewards of faith during the wait. The bridegroom is Christ, and the church is represented by the waiting bridesmaids who are invited to the wedding feast. The foolish bridesmaids represent those who are not steady and faithful and serious about their faith – they have run out of oil in their lamps. The parable reminds us that the end will come, and it will come suddenly, but it may not come soon.

So we can see why this parable has a timely message for us. For many today, our concept of the final coming of Christ has either been dulled or insulted by the end-time prophecy preachers who come along especially in years ending in '0' predicting that the day will be at a specific time that they have come to announce. Which is to forget Jesus' own words: "Only the Father knows the day and the hour." We should dismiss their predictions, but we should not dismiss the fact that there WILL be a final reckoning.

The parable ends with a warning to 'keep awake,' but sleepiness is not the issue. ALL the bridesmaids fell asleep. It is hard to keep awake waiting for Jesus over the course of a lifetime. The central issue concerns our being faithful with our discipleship -- maintaining our resources – our lamp oil -- so that when our moment comes, we are ready to meet Christ. In fact, the Greek phrase 'keep awake,' is better translated as 'always be ready.'

Third, this story puts us smack dab in the middle of a part of theology called eschatology, the study of the end. And dealing with the fact that life will end – either through our own death – theologically called 'individual eschatology' or because God will bring the whole of human history to a close – called 'corporate eschatology' – the point is that time WILL run out. There WILL be a reckoning of what we have done – or not done -- with our lives.

This reminds us that evil is not going to be tolerated forever. But for a believer – one who recognizes our role in setting things right in the world – and in ourselves – for those who are trying to trust in Christ and recognize the grace of God – this is the greatest promise imaginable. "O be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant, my feet!" Goes a line in the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," which takes much of its imagery from the Book of Revelation, THE book on eschatology in the New Testament. That joy comes with a recognition that there will be a judgment that accompanies our end. So joy that we will be with Jesus can be mixed with a certain fear or apprehension of judgment. But the promise is that God will at last make everything right; and we will know – somehow – that it has all been worth it after all. That is our Christian hope.

That great American theologian of the comics page, Snoopy, once said: "A whole stack of memories will never equal one little hope." Faith, or even life itself, is not possible without hope. But we need to go further. Set Snoopy's remark in the context of a graveyard, and it strikes home that whatever hopes cannot outlast this earthly life are fragile, even feeble, things. ROBUST hope rests on eschatology, that is, in the completion of that which was accomplished in Christ's resurrection. As Christians we have a big hope, not a little one – because God is a God who will not be defeated – not by death, not by evil, not by pandemic, for there are no forces that are beyond God's control. And so nothing good we do is wasted. That hope inspires

our best efforts, sustains us in our worst moments, and gives us peace when the Bridegroom comes in our final, midnight, hour.

Which then shows the lie of those who say that by and large, those who have been heavenly minded have been of no earthly good. As C.S. Lewis once remarked: *If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set out on foot to convert the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on earth precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one. Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in.' Aim at earth and you will get neither.* (citation not given)

This parable reminds us that eschatology touches every aspect of our Christian pilgrimage, individual and corporate. It affirms that God has acted and continues to act redemptively in history, and that history will one day be consummated according to God's purpose and plan in Christ. It promises every believer that the great vision of Julian of Norwich will indeed come true: "You shall see for yourself that all manner of thing shall be well." All manner of things shall be well – not just for a moment of earthly life, but for all eternity. This is our hope. The Bridegroom will indeed come. We need to stay awake and always be ready. Take advantage of the opportunities placed before us each day to prepare by lovingly serving God and neighbor. All that keeps our lamps lit and our wicks trimmed. And all shall be well. And all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Amen. (last section adapted from THE LIVING PULPIT, Jan-Mar 1999, p. 10-11)