

**HEALING IN A HURTFUL TEXT**  
**Matthew 25:1-13**  
**Eighth Street Mennonite Church**  
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**A HURTFUL TEXT CORRECTION**

Sometimes we just get it wrong ... like I did in the title of this sermon. So I need to begin today with a correction ... this text in Matthew 25 is not itself hurtful. Rather, how it has been interpreted and used has been hurtful.

There is an interpretation of these words of Jesus that urges the desperate need to avoid eternal punishment (hell – in other words). This interpretation has power and seems quite compelling ... after all, Jesus opens this parable saying, **“The kingdom of heaven will be like this.”** At the end of the parable, the bridegroom looks out at the 5 foolish bridesmaids and says **“Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.”** Then comes the warning **“Keep awake”**.

This interpretation essentially says that God will willingly discard half of us. God’s love is limited – and not everyone can rest in that love. The fear of being in wrong half (those who God refuses to know), means we are willing to do terrible things to each other to ensure that we are in the right group. To avoid eternal punishment we will gladly send others in our place.

But there is another way to interpret these very same verses. This interpretation offers healing and restoration. In fact, this interpretation is far more compelling than the fear-based one.

**HEALING IS POSSIBLE**

So if we for a moment allow that this parable is not threatening us with hell ... then we are free to actually sit with this text and let it open us to the incredible love and healing that is in these short 13 verses. To be honest though, sitting with this text isn’t easy. The text will reveal things about us we may not like ... it may even hurt to see these things. Yet if we can bear what it wants to show us ... this very same text will reveal who God is – which is endless mercy and love ... and THAT is exactly what **the kingdom of heaven will be like**.

**IT IS A PARABLE**

There are a couple more things that are important clues for being able to sit with this text. First of all, Jesus is now teaching his disciples. They’ve left the temple and all the arguments with the Pharisees and Sadducees have happened. They are now sitting on the Mount of Olives – just Jesus and the disciples. The disciples had come to Jesus privately with some deep questions, worried because the escalating threats to Jesus were obvious. So this parable ... this story ... is spoken to Jesus’ most intimate companions ... in days of incredible stress and fear.

Secondly, Jesus told parables because they held so much meaning ... they never just meant one thing. There are layers to parables ... so it is true that parables can offer many interpretations. So as we sit with this text we can expect that more than one thing will be revealed.

**WISE BRIDESMAIDS**

Jesus, sitting on the Mount of Olives, with his frightened disciples – sees their WISDOM and points it out. These disciples have been following Jesus for three years:

... watching this man who notices those who always get left out  
 ... getting glimpses of the loving ABBA that Jesus so clearly knows  
 ... they have willingly joined the gatherings of outcasts and found joy and fellowship in the most unlikely of circumstances.

The disciples all along have stayed with Jesus, and have even begun taking on his habits themselves. They were beginning to see, how the Pharisees and Sadducees – were lacking in the habits of the kingdom of heaven. The Pharisees in their deep desire for Israel’s faithfulness which would result in God’s blessing – were willing to sacrifice those who could not or would not keep the law. Jesus challenged their willingness to sacrifice others every time.

These disciples had been following long enough to know the slow transformation needed to see outcasts as friends. Over time they had become the WISE “bridesmaids”. The Pharisees were also “bridesmaids” so to speak – also waiting for the bridegroom. But they were foolish and unprepared for what actually was true faithfulness. The disciples had three years of training ... three years of watching Jesus extend mercy and wholeness to people who were considered way beyond help. The disciples had the “oil” ... and even extra flasks of “oil” ... because they had followed Jesus and were more and more able to imitate him.

Jesus and the disciples could invite the Pharisees to join this way of living ... but like in all manner of faith ... it isn’t simply a matter of sharing what we have. People can observe our faith, and they can see something is different about us. But we cannot simply hand them what we have found. For our faith has come slowly, and through repeatedly practicing the habits of Christ. They often don’t make sense to those “without extra oil” ... and while we may be asked to share what we have and even if we are willing it will not make immediate sense to those who are asking.

But let’s go back to the conversation between Jesus and the disciples. The disciples have just witnessed the Pharisees and Sadducees challenging Jesus. These leaders are regarding Jesus as a threat ... and are unable to see that they are all on the same side. They all (Pharisees, Sadducees, Jesus, the disciples) desire to be faithful to God – but the same desire does not erase opposition and violence.

Jesus, looking at these close friends sitting around him on this mountain, sees their fear ... and he sees that they truly are WISE to what he’s been doing. This is a very tender moment.

### **FOOLISH BRIDESMAIDS**

Jesus, sitting on the Mount of Olives, with his frightened disciples – also sees their FOOLISHNESS and points it out. These disciples have been following Jesus for three years ... and there is so much that they do not yet understand. The fact that James and John had both tried to secure positions close to Jesus – one of his right and one on his left – was a sign that they had not yet fully let go of the old habits of power to take on the new habits of power through making room for all.

Looking into the eyes of these followers, he knew the coming days were going to be excruciating. There is going to be delay. The victory of the Lamb of God will not be revealed immediately – in fact as Jesus is dying on the cross – that victory will look like failure. These disciples will experience the deepest midnight of their lives. These beloved friends with fear in their eyes now ... will see horrors that could break them. Yet Jesus refusing to save himself or them from the horror ... secures them all in the reality of love. Jesus will not participate in the violence which will be done to him. His refusal will save us all. He will not kill the Pharisees or the Roman occupiers ... or the disciples. In this refusal to participate in the violence, he will

expose it ... and its ugliness will be revealed. In this refusal to participate in the violence, he opens up the way of love that is embodied on this earth. No waiting needed.

Jesus looks at these beloveds in front of him, and knows that the violence is in them also. Even with their three years of training, the old ways are in them still – and the old ways are older than the new ways. They will be unprepared to stay awake and pray with him in the garden. They will be unprepared to be associated with him when directly asked if they know Jesus. In fact Peter, sitting right in front of him now, hanging onto every word Jesus says, will soon speak the words of the bridegroom when questioned by a fire on a cold night. It is Peter who will echo the words of the bridegroom “Truly I do not know the man.” Jesus is the one who will experience rejection, by one of his closest human friends. This is rejection is our human violence ... not God’s. This parable unrelentingly foreshadows what our FOOLISHNESS will do.

These disciples will be unprepared to carry on in hope when they watch their Messiah die. They are FOOLISH and are not ready to understand that Jesus’ death is anything but failure. They will run, looking elsewhere for “oil” and solace ... when, if they can just stay with Jesus, they will have all they need.

Jesus sees the disciples’ fear ... and he sees that they truly are FOOLISH to what he’s been doing. This is a very tender moment.

### **IT’S ABOUT THE WEDDING FEAST**

In all the pathos of this text ... it is so easy to get caught up in the desire to be WISE and not FOOLISH ... to have extra OIL and not be caught without it. Yet Jesus in looking at these disciples, sees what they cannot see – they are WISE and FOOLISH. They are prepared and they are unprepared. And they (and we) might be missing the most important thing! There is one coming who is providing a wedding – a celebration – a feast!

In the midnight hour ... in the darkest of time ... even as they anticipate Jesus’ execution ... God is shouting “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come to meet him!” In the darkest of times, with God, there can be a wedding – for with God it is always love.

As one theologian puts it, while Jesus understands “the deadly consequences of our sleep, what is even more remarkable, is that Jesus remains awake to the party that is underway. In the midnight hour while we are completely comatose to our own violent wrath, Jesus announces the radical unexpected heart of God, who is the Lord of the wedding party.” (Kris Rocke from *Street Psalms*) God always is fearless to enter the darkest midnight ... and when God appears love is there. The wedding image is no accident ... it is an intentional promise for these WISE/FOOLISH disciples ... for us WISE/FOOLISH disciples. The wedding feast is always set ... because that IS WHAT THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE and the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS FOR EARTH.

### **KEEP AWAKE**

Jesus, sitting with his beloved friends on the Mount of Olives, is offering everything he has. “Keep awake” he tells them ... you will see me broken and pierced – but keep watching. You will see me breathe my last – the violence snuffing out my very life – but keep watching. “Keep awake” ... you will see me – after three days – and the first word you will hear from my resurrected lips will be “PEACE”. Not DAMN YOU ... but PEACE. Not even DAMN YOU to Peter who denied him. To Peter, Jesus resurrected lips will ask “Do you love me?” See? With God it is always about love ... always.

So as a community of faith, let us Keep awake! Let us stay together and share the OIL of WISDOM among us ... and let us not reject each other based on FOOLISHNESS – for that is in us all. Let's help each other remember the celebration of healing and wholeness is always present and we are always invited into the feast. For with God there can be nothing else. Keep awake ... and enter the celebration!

**BENEDICTION**

**Believe it or not ... as you go into this week ...**

**there is love –**

**there is a wedding –**

**there is a feast!**

**For we cannot go where God is not! AMEN.**