Sermon: Proper 27A
Title: Mean Girls
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The traditional interpretation of this parable, the parable of the foolish bridesmaids, is that it is about being prepared. We are moving toward Advent, the season of preparation and expectation, and the readings are about being prepared.

So, this parable is taught here to ask us if we have brought enough oil for the long haul. Are we prepared to live lives of faith, guided by the principles of God, and are we prepared to stand before God at any moment? Not just when it is convenient? Not just on Sundays or when we feel repentant, but to live as faithful Christians through the long dark nights of our lives, ready for our faith to be examined at any moment.

Is our faith enduring? That is the question most commentators draw from this text.

There, that's your mini sermon. If that works for you, great. You can stop listening now. But I heard a much more challenging interpretation a few years ago, which I would like to share with you, and it came from a bunch of 13-year-olds.

Many years ago, I taught Sunday School to 7th and 8th graders and we encountered this parable. My method with them was to have a small group of them read the gospel and translate it into their own words and then tell it to the group in their version. So, the version that these 13-year-old kids came up with was this:

"So, there was a group of girls waiting to be let into a party. Half of them had ADD and were disorganized and half were mean girls. The disorganized girls didn't have enough oil to wait the whole time for the party to start and the mean girls bullied the disorganized girls into panicking and going to get oil so that, when the bridegroom came and the doors of the party opened, the disorganized girls were not there and didn't get into the party."

What I love about their reading is that it turns the whole parable on its head. The "good guys," that is, the bridesmaids who brought enough oil, are not the good guys in this version, they are stereotypical mean girls. And the bridesmaids we usually disparage as being unprepared are just disorganized. They just didn't bring enough oil.

I asked the kids why it wasn't the unprepared girls' fault? They were not prepared. They did not get into the kingdom. Why is that the mean girls' problem?

And they said, "Well, we thought of that, but it just didn't make sense that being unprepared, you know, like forgetting your gym suit or losing your homework, should mean that you don't

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get into heaven. Everyone forgets their gym suit sometimes, everyone loses their homework, but does that mean that you don't get into heaven?"

They said they knew that could not be right, that God could not be that inflexible, because God WANTS us to come into the kingdom, God isn't going to throw up barriers to half of us when anyone could be having a bad day.

What I love about this interpretation is that it does the one thing that we should always remember to do when we are reading scripture, by ourselves or together, which is begin and end with what we already know about God. All Scripture stories have at their base, the fact that God loves us. The fact that God wants us at the banquet.

So, if the interpretation we are offered presents a picture of God that doesn't begin and end with that, then it isn't right. And we need to keep looking for a way to understand the scripture that makes sense with what we know about God.

The kids dismissed that traditional reading because the God that is portrayed was *arbitrary:* "On *this day*, it matters that you forgot your gym suit. And if you were the one who lost their homework on *this day* then too bad."

That doesn't sound like the God of second chances. It doesn't sound like the God who forgives and heals. The God who sends you away because you are not prepared is NOT the God who fed five thousand people with a few loaves and fishes. THOSE people didn't come prepared and God forgave *them*.

But the fact of the matter is that five bridesmaids did not get into the banquet and the 7th and 8th graders blame the other five girls. Which I absolutely love.

What if the five girls who had oil had said, "You know what? You can stand by us. The light from five lamps will be enough for ten girls. The most important thing is that we are together when the bridegroom comes and we all get into the banquet."

This reading puts the responsibility for salvation (that is, entrance into the kingdom) not *just* in the hands of the individual (each bridesmaid brought her own lamp) but also, additionally, implies that we should help one another when we are not prepared. The mean-girl bridesmaids had the choice to look with compassion on the unprepared girls. And I mean, who of us has not had a day when we were unprepared? Who among us has arrived at the restaurant without any cash? The middle schoolers called the first five bridesmaids "mean girls" because they saw people they know in those bridesmaids (I should mention that these kids would go on to attend Evanston Township High School where the movie Mean Girls was filmed!)

In any given middle school, or high school, or college, or workplace, or any other collection of people, there are going to be people who say, "I have plenty of oil, but…it looks like you'll

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have to go out at midnight, which sounds like a very bad idea, and look for oil, which also sounds like a bad idea, and I am just going to wait here, because I can."

And in any given middle school, or high school, or college, or workplace, or any other collection of people, there are going to be people who say, "Well, I sure do wish you were prepared, I mean you got the same warnings I did… but here, you can use some of my light. After all, the oil, the light, the privilege, everything came from God in the first place, right? It's not mine to hoard."

In the minds of the middle schoolers, this was "The Story of the not Mean-girl Bridesmaids," the ones who helped their neighbors into the kingdom. *Those* women were Christians. *Those* women's actions could stand up to scrutiny at any time. *That* is the story of the God they knew.

That while each of us is responsible for our own life of faith, each of us is charged with living a life that, if Jesus came tomorrow, we could place before Him with confidence in a life lived in love. Each of us must be prepared at any time to show our lives to God at any time…

And ALSO, each of us is charged with *helping one another* be ready for that day as well. It begs the question:

- Are we helping one another along the way to the banquet
- Or are we pushing each other out of our way?
- Are we putting obstacles to the salvation of the people around us
- Or offering up what we have to give to help others to find the light that we have found in Christ Jesus?

There is one more troubling line in this parable. When the unprepared bridesmaids appeal to Jesus to be admitted to the banquet. He says to them, "I do not know you." I think the mistake they made is not that they were unprepared. It's not that they ran out of oil. It is that they lost faith at the last minute. They let the mean girls bully them into panicking. If they had stayed and their lamps had gone out, and even if the mean girls had not shared their light, does the God we know, just let them stand in the dark?

The God who loves us and wants us to enter the kingdom, the God who made us and loves us and wants us to find him, could find us…even in the dark.

This is a parable about being prepared because no one knows the day or the hour. But it is just possible that being prepared means NOT panicking and running away but doing our best to be ready and to help one another along the way. It may be that being prepared means being prepared to believe in a loving and grace filled God even when we are unprepared to believe that love is unconditional. Even if we have to help the "unworthy" along the path. And yes, even in the dark.

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