

Title: “Just showing up doesn’t get the job done!”

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, you entrusted your church to us: to mind it, to nurture it, to make it a light to a broken world; let your Spirit rest on all of us and thereby encouraging us to do your work in the world, strengthened by Christ Jesus, through whom we pray. Amen.

In early 1874, an inventor named Elisha Gray transmitted a few musical notes over a telegraph wire. He thought to himself, “If I can send music, perhaps I could send the human voice.” The New York Times reported predictions of a “talking telegraph” and the public began to grow eager for it.

Just one year later Gray believed he had the answer. Tin-can like voice chambers connected by a wire in a liquid that could turn vibrations into signals is what came into his mind. But inexplicably, he did not put his idea on paper for two months. After finally making a sketch, he waited four more days before he went to the patent office.

When he arrived, Mr. Gray was told that just two hours earlier a school teacher had come through that same door with his own sketch and had already applied for the patent. His name was Alexander Graham Bell. When you compared the sketches, the voice chambers, the wire, and the liquid everything was identical. The reason we know the name Alexander Graham Bell and until today, never heard the name Elisha Gray is simply because one man seized the opportunity when he could. The other one waited until it was too late.

Being prepared also involves thinking ahead. In other words, “What do I need if there is a plan B?” Jesus addressed this issue as well. The beginning of Matthew 25 is the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. This translation is polite as the Greek word translated bridesmaid is actually virgin.

As with many of Jesus’ parables, Jesus is trying to paint a picture of what the kingdom of heaven or of God is like. Jesus never attempts to say what heaven looks like, but instead gives a picture of what it is like to be there.

With this parable, it might be helpful to understand ancient Jewish wedding customs. It was a two-stage process: 1) a marriage contract between the parents or their agents, which is the betrothal where they are legally married, and 2) up to one year later, the wedding celebration and feast that takes place at the groom's parents' home where the feast can last for several days. There were separate festal processions of the bride and the groom to the wedding celebration.

In this picture, there are ten bridesmaids who went to meet the bridegroom. Not *a* bridegroom, some guy who is about to be married, but *the* bridegroom. It must have been at night, because they needed lamps.

Jesus divides the bridesmaids into two even teams of five each. One was the wise team. The other was the foolish team. There seems to be one reason why Jesus labels one group as wise and the other is foolish. The foolish bridesmaids took no oil for their lamps with them. It must have been a long walk, at night, to meet the bridegroom. An argument could be made that it was foolish for ten women to be walking at night. It was not likely safe, especially at night.

They arrive at their destination and there is no bridegroom. So, they need to wait. They are sleepy and they slept.

At midnight there is a shout that the bridegroom has, at last, arrived. Those bachelor parties. The bridesmaids trimmed their lamps. Alas, the foolish were low on oil. They asked their wise friends for some their oil. The wise decline because there is not enough for the wise and the foolish.

The wise suggest they walk back to town and buy some more oil. Okay. It is after midnight and is there *really* something like an AM/PM open in the wee hours with enough oil to sell them? This place knows nothing of electricity. Merchants then were not open after the sun sets.

In spite of all these barriers, the foolish leave to buy some oil. The bridegroom and the wise bridesmaids go into the wedding banquet. The door is shut and presumably locked.

The foolish arrive sometime later begging entry to the banquet. The lord of the banquet denies knowing the foolish bridesmaids. Jesus does not identify

the bridegroom as the lord of the banquet, but they may be the same person if the wedding is over then the bridegroom was transformed from a bridegroom to a husband.

What Jesus says next is more like an ending of a fable than a parable. The point of the parable is to stay awake for the day or the hour are not known.

Jesus began his discourses that day, outside the temple, with the signs of the end times. Then Jesus tells parables emphasizing that no one will know when the second coming will be. The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids sandwiched between other parables warning that any speculation of when the end will come cannot be predicted. So, Jesus is telling them that since it impossible to know when the end will come, it is necessary to stay alert and be on your best behavior.

Jesus often uses the banquet as a metaphor for heaven. Other parables paint a picture of a place without need or want, kinda like Star Trek without the Klingons. The banquet in this parable has a door. Once it is shut, there are no second chances.

Presumably, Jesus is the bridegroom. I don't think that I am going too far out on a limb to say that the bride is the church. It would be consistent with St. Paul's metaphors. All of us are servants of the church and thus are bridesmaids. The time, midnight, is the end times. The wise bridesmaids are prepared if the bridegroom is delayed. The foolish expected the bridegroom right away.

Besides being wise bridesmaids, what do bridesmaids do? Well, the first thing is to be prepared to meet the bridegroom at any time, day or night. We are to be prepared with the necessary light if the bridegroom arrives at night. Bridesmaids also attend to the needs of the bride. We are to meet the needs of the church.

One of my favorite movies is Rio Bravo starring John Wayne. If you haven't seen it, it is about a sheriff, Wayne, who gets involved with a town needing help from a cattle baron who runs the town, John Russell, and a drunken deputy played by Dean Martin. In this classic movie, Wayne's character summed up the essence of his cowboy philosophy by declaring to a less-than-perfect sidekick, "Just showing up doesn't get the job done!"

The church needs to be ready for Jesus. No one knows when Christ will return. It is better to be like the wise bridesmaids than the foolish. The church can only be ready if we make it ready. It doesn't happen by itself.

Text: **Matthew 25:1–13** (NRSV)

25 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids^a took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.^b ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids^c got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids^d came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.^{e1}

^a Gk *virgins*#

^b Other ancient authorities add *and the bride*

^c Gk *virgins*

^d Gk *virgins*

^e Other ancient authorities add *in which the Son of Man is coming*

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Mt 25:1–13). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.