

## When God Isn't In the Room

Every pastor I know has a few stories dealing with bizarre moments at a wedding ceremony. Some of the stories are almost beyond belief. My own experience includes a dog that came down the aisle wearing a vest on which the rings were attached.

Unbeknownst to me, the groom's brother could not get off work, and the dog was his last-minute replacement for best man.

Matthew, too, has his share of strange wedding stories, today's Gospel being yet another example. In our reading, Jesus tells about ten bridesmaids who are waiting for the groom to arrive so the wedding banquet can begin. That's a big wedding party. My record here at St. John's is nine bridesmaids.

Anyway, all ten are carrying lamps. Five, who are identified as "wise," bring extra oil for their lamps. Five, who are labeled as "foolish," do not.

The groom was delayed so long that they all fall asleep waiting. When he finally arrives at midnight, the bridesmaids find they have run out of oil. The wise ones refill their lamps with their reserves.

The foolish ones frantically try to borrow some from the wise bridesmaids, who won't share. As a result, the foolish five can't get into the banquet.

As a pure narrative, there are some major holes in the plot. Why are honored guests turned away at the door just because they failed to anticipate needing extra oil on the off-chance that the groom would fail to arrive at his own banquet until midnight?

What do they need the lamps, and why do they each need their own?

Worse yet, where is the Gospel here? The story seems directly opposed to everything Jesus teaches. The situation is the groom's fault, yet all the blame falls on the "foolish" women. No apologies from the groom, and not an ounce of compassion.

People who refuse to share with those in need are called wise. Members of the wedding party are shut out, and the groom, who knows them well enough to have asked them to be in the wedding, now claims not to know them at all. No word on where the bride is or how she reacts when she finds her new hubby has kicked her closest friends out of the reception.

Even stranger, the moral at the end of this story is, “Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Why is the moral, “Keep awake,” when that wasn’t even an issue in the story? Both the wise and the foolish women fell asleep, and it didn’t hurt the wise women at all. Had the foolish ones stayed awake, they still would have run out of oil.

So how is this an example of what the kingdom of heaven will be like? It makes God seem petty and heaven seem like a dysfunctional place.

Obviously, this is not meant to be a realistic situation. This wild and crazy story is told for a specific reason. It comes in the middle of five passages that all have one thing in common: the master is away; how are you going to deal with that?

The theme is stated back in chapter 24: *Keep awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*

Then come four parables that examine how well people deal with the fact that the Master is away.

First we meet a faithful and wise servant who does exactly what the Master directed him to do in his absence: he makes sure that all those around him get their allowance of food at the proper time. This is contrasted with a wicked servant who takes advantage of the Master’s absence to mistreat others and wastes his life in selfish, irresponsible living.

In today’s Gospel, we encounter those five bridesmaids who come prepared with the resources that will help them cope in the event of the Master’s absence. In contrast, we see five bridesmaids who make no preparations at all.

When the Master is delayed, they see their lamps running lower and lower. They still have plenty of time to acquire the resources they need, but make no attempt to do so until it is too late.

It’s a story that pastors see all the time: in times of stress, disaster, illness, tragedy, or death—those who have accumulated the resources of faith over the years have a better chance of success in dealing with these things. Those who have felt no need to acquire those faith resources when times were good tend to panic, despair or fall apart.

Those who have made the faith community a part of their lives, who have been fed by the Word of God, and who live in the light of the Gospel, find they can cope. It may not be easy, but they can cope. Those who have not, flail around for anything that even resembles a faith anchor.

When tragedy strikes, you cannot suddenly go out and buy faith resources. You can't borrow them from someone else. You either have them or you don't. And if you don't have any faith resources, you don't have a relationship with God, and you're completely in the dark as to what life is all about.

In next week's Gospel we will encounter three servants who are entrusted with their master's property in their master's absence. Two of them work hard to improve the property while the third does absolutely nothing.

Two weeks from today, we will encounter a host of people who are called to account for their time spent in their master's absence. Some did exactly what God called them to do; exactly what they would have done whether they felt Christ's presence among them or not.

The rest failed to do what God called them to do, and they as much as admit that had they known Jesus was around, they would have done things differently.

Hall of Fame basketball coach John Wooden's motto in life was, "The true test of your character is what you do when you think no one is watching." That is the test of character we are dealing with in all four of these four parables. It could be revised to say, "The true test of your faith is what you do when aren't performing for God."

That is the lesson of those stern and rather shocking words of the prophet Amos. "I hate, I despise your festivals and your solemn assemblies," says the Lord. "I will not accept your offerings. Take away from me the noise of your songs."

What a terrible thing to say to people who are offering their worship and praise to God! *I don't want your hymns and songs. I don't want your praise. I don't want your offerings. Get out of here, you make me sick.*

These are religious people he's talking to! Sincere, devout, upstanding people who acknowledge God as their creator and master and try to please God as best they know how.

Hearing the words of Amos makes us cringe a little bit. Our worship is similar in many ways to that performed by the Israelites. So is God talking to us? If worship so displeases God, why do we bother spending our Sunday's here? Why do we bother putting together the best and most respectful worship services we can?

That question is answered in the last verse of the prophecy, when Amos clarifies that the quality of worship itself is not the issue, but rather that something is missing. "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

The problem is that absent justice and righteousness, worship—even worship done well, with thought and reverence, has no value. Martin Luther said that you cannot have worship without social justice. In fact, justice and righteousness are far more important than worship.

*"God does not care even if you never build a church, if only you serve your neighbor,"* he wrote. With typical bluntness, he added that God's view is: *If you want to love and serve me, do it through your neighbor. He needs your help; I don't.*

Like Amos, he was not saying that worship is a bad thing. There is nothing wrong with getting together as a group to praise and present offerings to God. It is a wonderful thing to be in God's presence, to spend time in conversation with God, to hear what God might have to say, to nurture our relationship with a loving God.

The issue here, though, goes back to those four consecutive Gospel stories. When Christians gather in worship, we believe God is here in this place in a special way. We call this a house of God. It is easy to pay attention God in such a place.

When God is right here in the room with us, it is easy to lavish blessing and honor, glory and praise on God. Surrounded by songs and hymns and prayers, it is so easy to pledge obedience to God's command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

But what happens when we go outside this house? Out into the real, everyday world where God isn't so obvious, in fact is so inconspicuous that it is easy to lose sight of God altogether? When, for all practical purposes, the master is away.

Amos says, "It's easy to act holy when the master is in the room. We want God to notice us doing something good. Like a small child hollering, "Look at me! Look at me!" when he or she is about to do something noteworthy, we want God's eyes on us when we're on our best behavior.

We will be at our most devout and respectful when we feel the presence of God. But character is defined by what we do when nobody's watching. When we are not so aware of God's presence. When we are out in the world preoccupied with our day-to-day life.

Those four parables describe a more accurate test of character, a truer test of discipleship. Justice and righteousness is the work we do when God isn't looking over our shoulder.

Jesus made a similar point about religious people who liked everyone to see how religious they were. Who liked to pray out loud in public places, who were ostentatious in their tithes and offerings, who claimed to be God's most devoted followers. Who wanted everyone to know how well they knew their Scripture.

The measure of faithfulness is not what we do when we feel God's eyes on us; it is how well we do what God would do if God were in the room.

We are not immune in our world to this tendency to show off for God. There are many reasons why I have insisted all through my time here at St. John's that pledges are made anonymously.

One of those reasons is that character is what we do when no one is looking. No one at St. John's will ever look at your pledge that you will bring to the baptismal font in a few minutes. That is between you and God, and we will let you decide if God is in the room.

The four Gospel parables, and the fiery speech of Amos, challenge us to think about these two things:

First, what is the reputation of Christianity in this country today among those who are outside the church? More and more, they identify Christians as people who talk a good game when they think God is in the room. Who claim an identity as God's elect, when they think the Master is looking.

But when blinded by self-interest, they become different people—people of weak character. Who even as they claim loyalty to God, lose sight of God. As soon as God leaves the room, they promote hatred, bigotry, arrogant judgmentalism and selfishness, with no compassion for the poor and downtrodden. That is the message sent by so many Christians.

Meanwhile I recently found remarkable character in an unexpected place. Last month, Linda and I visited a friend who is serving time in this state prison in Iowa. Those in prison have done things they are not proud of, things that they have had to answer for.

Because of this, most of us believe that you will not find a group of people with less strength of character than those serving time in prison. We find ourselves looking down on them as lesser human beings.

It is a sobering to encounter first-hand the many ways the system has of letting them and their families know how greatly inferior they are to the rest of us good people.

It was while inside that prison that I heard this story. When Hurricane Harvey struck Houston, a group of prisoners in Texas asked to visit the warden. They told him that they had seen pictures of the devastation on their television. They had spoken to prison staff who continued to come to work despite losing their homes. They had heard from people who were struggling.

The leaders of this group included some of the more serious offenders in prison, those who had been incarcerated for more than a dozen years. They said they intended to help.

It didn't seem they could do much. Prisoners were paid an average of 40 cents an hour for their work, and almost all of that went for personal hygiene items, paper and pencils for writing, and the occasional snack. Many of them had less than \$5 in their commissary accounts.

Yet within one month, 6,600 prisoners in Texas donated \$54,000 to hurricane relief. While the amount may not seem impressive, that money represented more than 100,000 hours of their labor.

This happened in places where songs, hymns, and devout prayers are scarce. Where harps, and magnificent houses of worship simply don't exist. No one knows the names of those who donated. My guess is that few, if any, of you were aware that this small branch of the ever-flowing stream of justice existed. They did this work of God when no one was looking.

Matthew's Gospel, and the book of Amos both ask the question: How do you act when God isn't hovering over you, when it seems God is not in the room?

In a raw and sinful world, sometime it is difficult to locate the presence of the master. That is especially true of a prison.

But it turns out God is always in the room, even among the lowest of the low, especially among the lowest of the low, spreading grace to the lives of those who are open to it, so they can spread it to others.

When the parables say, “Stay awake,” they are saying “Don’t fall asleep on God’s grace. Be ready for it. Keep your hearts open to it. Don’t miss it.”

And the peace of God that passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.