

## **If You Can't Be Prepared, Then You'd Better Learn How to Dance...**

### **GOSPEL MATTHEW 25:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup>Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup>When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; <sup>4</sup>but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. <sup>5</sup>As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. <sup>6</sup>But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ <sup>7</sup>Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup>The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ <sup>9</sup>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.’ <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ <sup>12</sup>But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ <sup>13</sup>Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Mrs. Polansky was dying. She made it to her mid 60's when she became sick with an aggressive late stage of uterine cancer. When she and her husband found their way to Dr. Ira Byock, a physician who specializes in palliative, or end of life, care, he told them there was very little medicine could do. He told them at this point, with her end drawing near, the most important thing would be for them to say to one another what he calls the Four Most Important Things. He told them the Four Most Important things are: Please forgive me; I forgive you; Thank you; and I love you.<sup>1</sup>

Byock believes it's important to say all of these four things to the people we love- that there is a healing power in our words that often surprises us. We often think- surely they know how I feel, I don't need to say it. But saying the words can change everything. The hard part is most people find it pretty easy to say 3 out of 4 of them to the people we love, but often we get stuck on one of them. This turned out to be the case with Mr. Polansky.

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<sup>1</sup> Ira Byock, [The Four Things That Matter Most](#) (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004) Dr. Byock records this story as involving a third party, counselor Lynn Hamalish. For the sake of simplicity I've collapsed the role of Byock and Hamalish into one. But the reality, as in most things, is more complicated.

Mr. Polansky surprised Dr. Byock the next day by coming in. He said he wanted to talk about the four things. He said he felt he could ask for forgiveness, and he could forgive his wife, and he could be thankful for her- but no way no how would he be able to say that he loved her. No way. Byock was puzzled and asked him why not. Mr. Polansky said when they met they feel head over heels for one another. He loved her more than anything in the world. But the years took their toll- and early on he discovered she had been unfaithful to him. More than once. He said it had been a long time now, and so he could get over that, but there was no way could he say I love you. He said, "I don't love her, and I will not say that to her," he said. "She burned that out of me long, long ago."

Taking a risk, Byock asked him how they slept at night. Back to back, Mr. Polansky explained. Why? Well, Byock suggested: what if he could try turning towards his wife's back and picturing in his mind and in his heart the woman she had been when they first fell in love. And what if, as he pictured that image, what if he would mouth or whisper, "I love you," to his wife's back. Would he be willing to try that? And Mr. Polansky just looked at him like he was crazy. Mr. Polansky shook his head, and grumbled that he'd think about it. Dr. Byock was kicking himself for coming up with such a stupid idea.

We always think there's going to be more time. We always think there will be another day, another moment, another time to say what it is we need to say.

But it isn't true, is it? Every single one of us has or will come face to face with the moment we are gone, or someone we love is gone, and there is no coming back- this side of the grave.

I think that's what this parable, this story is about. Jesus says heaven is like this- he says it's like a wedding- only the bridegroom hasn't shown up. He says the kingdom of heaven is like a group of bridesmaids who have been waiting for the bridegroom to come so they can all go into the wedding feast together. Only, he doesn't show up when he's supposed to. And they wait. And they wait. And they wait.

Now as hour after hour passed, the bridesmaids fell into two very different groups- half of them kept waiting for him, keep expecting him to show up, and they kept themselves prepared accordingly, keeping their lamps filled and trimmed. The five wise act as if he could come any second. But the others, the foolish ones, *he morone* in Greek, the little morons, they're like, hey, maybe he'll come or maybe he won't. But hey, we may as well enjoy ourselves now, right? The foolish ones act as if there will always be tomorrow.

One scholar says the problem with this parable is actually not the surprising return of the master, the surprising advent of God in our lives; she says the problem is the long delay.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Byock says when it comes to our own end, or the end of those we love- we are a lot more like the foolish bridesmaids than the wise. He says it is amazing how many people make it to his office having lived for years carrying around these heavy burdens- carrying around these important things they've needed to say, needed to, almost literally, get off their chest. There's just a part of us deep down that wants to believe there's always going to be another day. And when the door is shut- it's just so surprising.

The rabbis talked about this all of the time. One of the most famous rabbis, Rabbi Eliezer who lived around the time of Jesus, he said that what you wanted to do was to repent, to get

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Bridesmaids-The-Time-is-Now-Alyce-McKenzie-10-31-2011>

right- just before you died. Get right with the world just before you died- you know, why waste any time? His students all nodded their heads, thinking this made sense. All but one. And he raised his hand saying, “But rabbi, we don’t know when we’ll die. How can we repent right before our death if we don’t when we’re going to die.” And with a twinkle in his eye, Rabbi Eliezer said, why I suppose we’d better get started living well now, and treat this moment as if it may be our last.

Byock didn’t see the Polanky’s again until after Mrs. Polansky had died. Mr. Polansky again came into the office. He could barely sit down before he said: “I did what you suggested. We were lying in bed in the dark and I closed my eyes and pictured her as she was when we met. I whispered to her back, ‘I love you.’ I said it to her, but I could see my young bride in the woman beside me. Before long I actually started feeling the love that I once had for her. I hadn’t felt that way since I was in my thirties. After a while I woke her up and told her I loved her. And she said something to me she never said in all our years of marriage. ‘You are such a beautiful man. My rock.’ She her hand on my cheek and had tears in her eyes. Then she said, ‘You saved me.’ We kissed, and I knew in that moment that underneath it all she had always loved me. I got her back,” he said. “I got her back. The last weeks of my wife’s life were the best time in the past twenty years of our marriage. I will miss her, but I can say good-bye now.”

You know, a lot of people get angry that when the bridegroom does come, the five wise ones don’t share their oil. The foolish say to them, “Hey, you’ve got more, why don’t you give us some.” And sometimes we think, “Yeah, why don’t you?” I mean that would be the Christian thing to do, wouldn’t it? To share.

But of course this isn't real life- this is a parable. It's an allegory. And the truth is, there are some things you have to do yourself- and no one else can do them for you. And one of those things is to tell the people you care about how you feel- while they're still here. No one can do this for us. No one can give us this kind of oil- we have to find it, gather it, and kindle it ourselves. There are some things no one else can say for us.

That's what the Polansky's discovered. Were they wise or foolish, the Polansky's? I thought about that this week. Were they more like the wise bridesmaids or the foolish? They were foolish in that they wasted so many years of their life. They were wise to finally say the things that mattered most.

I think ultimately they were like foolish bridesmaids who were given a second chance. Indeed, a lot of scholars have noted the ending of this parable really isn't as final as it sounds. In the end the door is shut, and the bridegroom says go away- I don't know you. But when this happens the night is young. We have no idea what would happen if they keep knocking. Maybe the Polansky's are what happens when we keep knocking?

Mystic and monk Thomas Merton wrote a poem about what might have happened to the foolish bridesmaids. He writes:

There were five virgins  
Rowdies  
Who arrived for the wedding of the Lamb  
With their motor-scooters burned out  
And their gas tanks empty

But since they knew how to  
Dance  
They were told to  
Stick around anyhow.

So that's it: there were  
Five rowdy virgins  
Without gas  
But really caught up  
In the action

There were then ten virgins  
At the wedding of the lamb.

So, the truth is today and tomorrow and the day after that- we can't really count on them. They are pure gift. And we should live accordingly. But when we find ourselves being foolish- when we aren't ready...well then, by God's grace, may we remember to keep knocking, and to dance, and to dance long enough and with enough abandon that we remember whose we are, that each moment is a gift, so that the bridegroom can't help but laugh and welcome us back in to the feast. **Amen.**