

“How can you be a fool and not be foolish?” or “No one wants to be a fool, right?”

Or “There are fools and there are the foolish!”

<sup>NRS</sup> **Matthew 25:1** "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.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Joshua 24:1** Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. <sup>2</sup> And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors-- Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor-- lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. <sup>3</sup> Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac..." Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him **in** sincerity and **in** faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and **in** Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup> Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served **in** the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites **in** whose land you are living; **but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.**" <sup>16</sup> Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; <sup>17</sup> for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs **in** our sight. He

protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; <sup>18</sup> and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived **in** the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God." <sup>19</sup> But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. <sup>20</sup> If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good." <sup>21</sup> And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the LORD!" <sup>22</sup> Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." <sup>23</sup> He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel." <sup>24</sup> The people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey." <sup>25</sup> So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

The question for this day might be, “How can you be a **fool** and **not be foolish**?” As we near the end of the Christian year, the Gospel of Matthew confronts you and me with this startling parable of the Kingdom of Heaven compared to the Ten Bridesmaids. Five of these bridesmaids were deemed “**wise**,” the remaining were called “***foolish***.” Five are ready for the arrival of the Bridegroom with their lamps trimmed and full of oil and more in case of a long wait. The other five bridesmaids did not have enough oil for the waiting; and their lamps were running low on oil. The bridesmaids who had enough oil became known to the master as “wise.” On the other hand, the bridesmaids who were

running low on supplies and who begged for more oil from the other five became known as the “foolish.” Five were ready and prepared for the waiting and the arrival of their Bridegroom.

The Kingdom of Heaven is compared not to the Bridesmaids as much as it was to their state of spiritual preparedness. Five were ready and five were not ready. Worse yet, the wise could not help the foolish to be ready. So, when the Bridesgroom does return, the Lord does not open the doors to the five bridesmaids who being unprepared had left their post to get supplies. Instead, the Lord said that he did not know them. To the others he gave instructions.

*“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”* Presumably, this last phrase refers to the date, time, and location of his return.

Shocking story, isn't it? Some are ready and are able to be present when the bridegroom returns and to receive the blessing of his presence. The others though they returned to the feast to be with the bridegroom, they were too late with too little

preparedness. They were foolish. They had not been alert, awake and ready to greet the bridegroom.

This is a judgment story on the one hand, because it clearly puts those who are ready and wise within the bounds of relationship with the bridegroom, while the others are foolish and become excluded from the bridegroom and his wedding feast. The judgment is overcome by the joy and grace that is offered to those who were ready, waiting prepared and joyful to receive their Lord.

There is a difference here in spiritual terms between being wise and being foolish. But, elsewhere in the New Testament, especially in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he lifts up to a level of admiration the title of "fool" for those who take the side of Jesus Christ, crucified and raised from the dead. What a contrast. Paul praises the fool and Matthew condemns the foolish! How can one be a fool and not be foolish?

It really boils down to a fool who is not ready to be a disciple, who is laxidascal, slothful, lacking in spiritual energy and commitment to be a faithful, diligent and active servant of the

crucified and risen Christ, our Lord. The foolish is lacking the quality that is necessary to witness of the God of grace and sacrificial love revealed in Jesus. The fool is one on the other hand who appears out of place, not acceptable to current standards, and even ridiculous in terms of putting faith into one who is called a savior but who willingly submits to the death on a cross. To the world, the strong are able to reveal their raw power in conquering the enemy and establishing superiority over the weaker ones. The wise to the standards of the world are able to rely upon their own resources not needing God's divine assistance to save themselves. They, in essence, are human-made idols who control their own destiny. They are **wise** because of their intelligence, their verbal skills and their mastery over knowledge, elocution, mastery of speech and oratory, and political positioning. They are the ones who have the numbers to stop a filibuster or pass a bill without any resistance from anyone in opposition. Strength is in numbers, superior power and position characterize the wise one's ability to control the weaker and less able. It is the strong over the weak. It is

the economically powerful over the poor and miserable of the streets. It is a blessing for the “haves” and a curse for the “have nots.” It is one class above another, one race and one nationality over another. It is one army better than another. It is being number one, never accepting the number two or a lesser status that makes one seem less than wise and strong in the eyes of the world.

Is this the Gospel message in Jesus Christ that we should believe and follow, even giving up our life in obedience? Paul **celebrates the fool** and probably **condemns the foolish** as

Matthew has shown us in the parable of the bridesmaids. Who is the fool and who is foolish? What is better and what is worse?

<sup>17</sup> For Christ didn't send me to baptize, but to preach the Good News-- and not with clever speeches and high-sounding ideas, for fear that the cross of Christ would lose its power. <sup>18</sup> I know very well how foolish the message of the cross sounds to those who are on the road to destruction. (1 Cor. 1: 17-18)... <sup>20</sup> So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made them all look foolish and has shown their wisdom to be useless nonsense. <sup>21</sup> Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never find him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save all who believe. <sup>22</sup> God's way seems foolish to the Jews because they want

a sign from heaven to prove it is true. And it is foolish to the Greeks because they believe only what agrees with their own wisdom.<sup>23</sup> So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.<sup>24</sup> But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God.<sup>25</sup> This "foolish" plan of God is far wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is far stronger than the greatest of human strength." (1 Cor. 1:20-25)

God has a wonderful and surprising way of turning our world upside down! God's ways clearly are not our ways – the ways of the world do not reflect the righteous holiness of God. There is a mystery of grace present in these distinctions. First, we cannot save ourselves. This is the wisdom of Christ. We are saved in grace revealed to us in the sacrificial love of Jesus. Second, we are recipients, not producers, of grace as a free gift of God's generous compassion and mercy toward us.

The amazing grace is that sin and death are conquered through the cross and the empty tomb. They are not conquered by the brute overwhelming military force of airstrikes, bombing and invasion of soldiers. This seems impressive as it did when we

watched the early hours of bombardment of Baghdad in 2003 or in Afghanistan in driving back the Taliban. But, this worldly wisdom of power and superiority of numbers yielded to the greater need to conquer the heart, where true allegiance and ultimate loyalties lie.

If there is no wisdom in connecting with each other, then we remain in strife and hopeless prospects of murder and mayhem.

God's wisdom and God's strength seems foolish to this kind of world. In fact it might seem downright stupid and foolish to put trust in the love of God, in the cross of Jesus. This power of the spirit does not compare favorably in the world's eyes with the power of a superior general with all the best state of the art weapons to obliterate the enemy.

Maybe we are foolish if we believe the philosophy of empty words and promises of lasting freedom attained in the force of war. But, can we be a fool at the same time to believe in Christ? When Christ submits to the Romans to be killed and humiliated, we might be despairing and call this submission foolish, when, in fact this is God's supreme act of strength.

Years ago when I was serving in the US Army Air Defense as a young second lieutenant, I soon developed a healthy skepticism of our superior forces. I was assigned to an air defense Nike Hercules Missile Battery in Germany. We were right smack in the middle of what has been known for centuries as the “Fulda Gap.” It is here that the balloon goes up when an invasion occurs. We were a line of defense against air attack.

I remember walking the snow covered grounds on the first week of my arrival. Another new officer and I came upon a metal box sitting in the open atop a bunker. The unit was “down” for repairs. We were not in a ready status online. But, we were supposed to be getting “ready.” What we found open in full view with snow slightly covering this box was a container filled with the firing mechanisms for the missiles. A few weeks later we went online and I was tested immediately as the officer of the day. The Regional and Brigade HQ came at us for readiness alert inspections. We passed with superior ratings; but our equipment

failed the moment that the inspectors went off sight. We went out and stayed out for a period of time. We were not really ready.

Today, you and I are waiting. We are a church in waiting for God's calling us to service. If we are not ready, we cannot be very effective in responding. The course to get ready is different than what is taught in the world. Christ asks us to give up our life, to take up the cross and to follow him. This following is a path that leads to the cross and other self sacrifices that seem foolish and inept to the world. But, at the heart of a faith community, to be a fool to follow the Christ of the Cross is the only way to life and eternal hope. Peace does not come without the folly of the way of Jesus in this world.

So, it is different. Being a fool for Christ is not foolish in God's eyes. But, being lazy, unprepared and unwilling to serve are signs of foolishness in the Kingdom of Heaven. No one can give us wisdom. It comes from the hungering and thirsting of the heart for something that gives meaning, purpose and peace to life in this confusing, violent and divisive world. To be this servant of holy

boldness we have to be willing to be a fool. We cannot worry about looking foolish.