

“The Foolish and the Wise”

Matthew 25:1-12

Sermon series: “Who Do You Say That I Am?”

Today’s answer: Jesus, the judge

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In February of this past year, Anthony Ray Hinton spoke at Furman University about his experience as a death row inmate in Alabama.

Hinton, as some of you may know, was wrongfully convicted of murdering two people in 1985. He maintained his innocence for 30 years, and was finally set free in 2015 when the U.S. Supreme Court declared that Hinton’s original defense lawyer was “constitutionally deficient.”

They ordered that Hinton should receive a new trial.

The state of Alabama then dropped its case against Hinton. They could provide no conclusive evidence to tie Hinton to the crimes.

What do you say when you’ve lost 3 decades of your life because of negligence, carelessness, racism, and injustice?

In his bestselling memoir about this experience, *The Sun Does Shine*, Hinton writes the following:

“Since my release, not one prosecutor, or state attorney general, or anyone having anything to do with my conviction apologized.

“I forgive them,” he goes on.

“They took thirty years of my life. If I couldn’t forgive, if I couldn’t feel joy, that would be like giving them the rest of my life.”¹

But Hinton also added, upon his release:

¹ Anthony Ray Hinton with Lara Love Hardin, *The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life, Freedom, and Justice*, New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2018.

“Everybody that played a part in sending me to death row, you will answer to God.”²

Of course, Anthony Ray Hinton did not invent the idea that everyone will answer to God.

The Bible said it long ago.

In our first passage today from Acts, Peter declares:

“He [Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.”

Jesus, the judge.

That’s our topic this morning.
And admittedly, it feels...a bit HEAVY.

For starters, this topic raises all sorts of questions:

If Jesus is our judge, how will we be judged?
With mercy, yes; with compassion, absolutely;
with truth about our lives...
but what does that mean?

What does it...actually look like?

How can the judgment of Jesus go hand in hand with the grace of Jesus?

Just saying the word—judgment—is that what you were hoping for when you came to church this morning? Yeah, my preacher’s really going to ZING me with some judgment today!

And so we come to our text.

² Found at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/04/03/how-the-case-against-anthony-hinton-on-death-row-for-30-years-unraveled/>.

A parable of judgment, to be sure...but at first glance, that seems to be the ONLY THING we can sure about.

It's a tale of ten bridesmaids.
Five were foolish—five were wise.

They all set off to meet their bridegroom, and their lamps are burning bright...

But the bridegroom is late.
And so they wait...and they wait...and they fall asleep.

Round about midnight, an announcement: it's the groom, he's on the way!

The bridesmaids look at their lamps,
and much to their chagrin, their lights are going out.

So HALF the group says to the other half:

Look, you brought extra oil for your lamps...give us some of your oil!

But the five with EXTRA oil refuse,
and the first five go off in search of more oil,
and when they're gone, the groom arrives, and he takes
the bridesmaids who happen to be there into his party,
but he shuts the others out.

That's the story.
Just to make sure we're on the same page here...

Jesus told a story in which a bunch of people REFUSE to share,
they get REWARDED after they refuse to share,
and the ones without—
the ones with NEED—
they get EXCLUDED from the party!

Clear as crystal, right?

But before we write this parable off, let's play with this a little more.

There were 10, says Jesus.

And 5 were foolish, and 5 were wise.

Now what EXACTLY is it that distinguishes the foolish from the wise?

Is it that the wise stayed awake, and the foolish fell asleep?

No, all the bridesmaids fall asleep.

Is it that the wise were the ones with oil, and the foolish had no oil?

No, all the bridesmaids start out with oil.

The distinguishing feature between the wise and the foolish—what is it?

It's the EXTRA oil.

The wise aren't wise because they're prepared for the bridegroom to come. If the bridegroom had been on time, all the bridesmaids would've waltzed right into the party together....

No, the wise are different because they're prepared for the bridegroom NOT to arrive. They're ready for his DELAY.³

Now many biblical scholars suggest that this was a parable intended for the early church.

Do you remember when the early church expected Jesus to return?

In their own lifetime, right?

The early church believed that Jesus would come back right away, and usher in God's kingdom, and SET EVERYTHING RIGHT, and it would happen very soon.

But then it didn't happen very soon.

And years went by.

³ My exegesis of this passage is indebted to Thomas G. Long's discussion of this text in his commentary, *Matthew*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

And decades went by.

And if Matthew was writing his Gospel roughly 50 years after the resurrection of Jesus, the DELAYED RETURN OF JESUS would have been an enormously important issue.

If Jesus hasn't come back yet, what does it mean?
Does it mean we were wrong about Jesus?
Does it mean that Jesus is NEVER coming back?

And if he's never coming back, what difference does it make how we live?
What difference does it make whether we keep the faith?

And so this parable says very directly, to Matthew's church:

Don't be foolish.
Keep the faith.
Be like the wise bridesmaids.

Be prepared—not for a future that goes as you had planned,
but by trusting that God will show up,
even when the hour is late,
even when the night is dark...

All of which is fine and good for the church in Matthew's day.
But what about the church in our day?

After all, we've got a parable in which some are in and some are out
and the criteria for who's in and who's out
involves the wise bridesmaids NOT SHARING their extra oil...
and we don't even know what the oil stands for...
how is any of this good news that Jesus is our judge?

If we can put the parable on pause for a moment, there are other images out there...I'm personally fond of a scene that C.S. Lewis gives us. In his delightful book *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, you'll remember there are four children.

One of those children is Edmund.
 And Edmund has done some awful things to his sister, Lucy.
 And Edmund has betrayed all of three of his siblings, and gone over to the side of the White Witch.

So toward the end of the story, when the great lion, Aslan, appears—Aslan, you will recall, is a Christ-figure in this tale—there is a scene in which Edmund is rescued from the clutches of the White Witch.

And Lewis writes:

When the other children woke up next morning...they saw Aslan and Edmund walking together in the dewy grass, apart from the rest of the court. There is no need to tell you (and no one ever heard) what Aslan was saying, but it was a conversation which Edmund never forgot. As the others drew nearer Aslan turned to meet them, bringing Edmund with him.

“Here is your brother,” he said, “and—there is no need to talk to him about what is past.”

Edmund shook hands with each of the others and said to each of them in turn, “I’m sorry...”⁴

If we’re talking judgment and Jesus...why can’t it be as simple as that?

A private conversation with each of us—and after that talk,
 each of us is able to go to anyone we have wronged,
 and repent of our sin?

Maybe it IS as simple as that, I don’t know.
 I do know this.

Whenever we hear this morning’s parable, we make an assumption right from the beginning...that each of the bridesmaids stands for a different person.

Five foolish people. Five wise people.
 I wonder if that’s the right assumption.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, New York: HarperCollins, 1978.

After all, show of hands...how many of you in this room are WISE...**all the time?**

And how many of you are foolish...ALL THE TIME?

Right.

And how many of you, by God's grace, have made some wise decisions in your life?

And how many of you have done some foolish things in your life, things that you now regret?

It strikes me that if we're talking about the foolish and the wise, we're not talking about two different people. We're talking about two tendencies, both of which exist in every human heart.

I recall a day from the first few months that I was in ministry.

A couple of the men in my first congregation asked if I'd be willing to join their group to make a foursome for a golf tournament later that month, raise some money for charity.

Well...I told them I wasn't any good at golf.

Mini-golf? Yes.

Hitting balls on fairways? Not in my skill-set.

But they said, Aw, it's just a charity tournament. Join us.

They would NOT take no for an answer, so I signed up.

And it was a hot summer day.

And it was Texas.

And I was very careful on summer days in Texas, I always made sure I had sunscreen on, didn't want to get burned.

Didn't want to be foolish.

Twenty minutes or so before the tournament began, I decided I'd better warm up, hit a few balls.

I joined a group of about 15 or so, all lined up practicing their drives.
And I got my driver out. Put the ball on the tee.
And I took my practice swing.

And wouldn't you know it, it just went sailing...problem was, the "it" that went sailing was NOT the ball.

No, the ball stayed right where I had put it on the tee. It was my driver that went flying. All that sunscreen and sweat made my hands so slippery, I lost hold of the club as I swung it.

My driver landed about 20 yards away.

Someone yelled, "EVERYONE: STOP SWINGING!"
I trotted out in front of all those other golfers to retrieve my club.
My face was burning red—not from the sun, but from embarrassment.

Of course, that was just a harmless golf tournament.
But sometimes our decisions are not so harmless.

- Like when we rush by people who really need our attention.
- Or when we pass judgment on someone for the very thing that we are most guilty of doing ourselves.
- Or when we put too much energy into controlling the future, instead of trusting in God to guide us through our future.

So getting back to the parable...

What if, when the door SHUTS at the end of this parable—and those foolish bridesmaids can't get into the banquet—what if, instead of a THREAT...what if it's a promise?

And all the souls of the earth are walking up that bridge:
 the “trash,” the freaks, the lunatics—
 and her type...
 the responsible, educated, respectable ones—
 they’re in back, walking up as well.

But then she notices something else.

All of the people in the back have a look of shock on their faces,
 because as they get closer to heaven,
 all of their virtues are being burned away.

Of course, O’ Connor doesn’t want her reader to miss the point, so do you recall what she named the young woman in the doctor’s office who threw the book, which led to this revelation?

Her name is Mary Grace.
 Mrs. Turpin gets hit upside the head...by Grace.

The story ends with Mrs. Turpin walking back to her house.
 She hears the crickets, but they aren’t making cricket noises.

They are the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field,
 and they’re shouting ***HALLELUJAH!***⁵

Amen.

⁵ “Revelation,” by Flannery O’Connor, in *The Complete Stories of Flannery O’Connor*, by Flannery O’Connor, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997.