

When Being 'Wise' Means Leaving Someone Behind

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[0:00] So good morning. My name is Tonetta and I'm one of the pastors here at the Table Church.!

From Octavia Butler's novel, *The Parable of the Sower*, that I keep returning to and that keeps coming up in this series. It's the kind of thing that's like when your tongue just keeps working a sore tooth in your mouth that's uncomfortable, but also like it's trying to get your attention.

As we've said before, it's the refresher of memory, the novels about this teenager, Lauren Olamina, a black teenager who's building this fragile community. In the wreckage of a nation that has collapsed under its own cruelty.

And a nation crying out to make America great again in Octavia Butler's words. And Lauren writes this in her journal, the destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars.

The destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars. Earthseed is the name of the fragile community being built by Lauren and a handful of marginalized refugees.

[1:33] Yet she has the audacity to express a belief that what they are building together, as small and barely surviving as it is, has cosmic weight.

She has the audacity to trust that her tiny adaptive community Earthseed has an importance on a planetary and interspecies level.

For her, it is not those with power or with wealth or with expertise who hold the maps to the new world coming, however much they might believe that delusion.

It is those who have been pushed to the edge who are the truest cartographers. While Butler's story is fiction, I want us to hold beside it a piece of history that is not only factual, but it's the kind of thing that you can continue over and over to mine for truth.

In the summer of 1969, overlapping events expressed the reality of two Americas with two different horizons of imagination.

[2:51] One horizon. A man in a white suit planting a flag on gray dust a quarter million miles from home. Apollo 11.

Science fiction made government fat. Another chapter, maybe the most startling chapter in America's long advance towards its own utopia.

Bigger, further, first, best. The other horizon. The other horizon. A stage in Mount Morris Park, Harlem.

With an audience that was packed shoulder to shoulder for six free Sunday afternoons. Mahalia Jackson's voice cracking in the air.

Nina Simone boldly asking the crowd, Are you ready to give yourself, your love, your soul, your heart to create life?

[3:52] It was called by some people, Black Woodstock. The primary footage of the event sat in a basement until, mostly until about 2019, when Questlove made his directorial debut with a documentary about it called *Summer of Soul*.

Now, I was introduced to this documentary by this sociologist named Ruha Benjamin, who highlights portions of it in her book.

There are 40,000, perhaps 50,000 people at Mount Morris Park in Harlem, explains a TV reporter. But they are not watching the moon landing. They are here at the Soul Festival. And for many of them, this is far more important than the mission of Apollo 11.

When asked about the moon landing, one person put it bluntly, I couldn't care less. This is the kind of person that always makes it on TV. I love this.

[5:00] They said, I couldn't care less. The cash they wasted, as far as I'm concerned, in getting people to the moon could have been used to feed poor black people in Harlem and all over this country.

Never mind the moon. Let's get some of that cash in Harlem. And then another person responded, I think it's important. But I don't think it's any more relevant than the Harlem Cultural Festival here. I think it's equal. Two competing visions of progress playing out in the same July. One built on expansion and conquest and distance.

Go further, go faster, plant your flag somewhere where nobody's planted their flag before. The other built on gathering. The other built on gathering. On a joy that refused to wait for permission. On bodies pressed together in a park in the heat, insisting that here, now, we are worth celebrating. What fascinates me is that both these experiences, which seem to offer these opposite horizons of imagination, ask the same set of questions.

[6:14] Where is your utopia? What is it built on? Who is allowed to be inside of it?

What are the technologies of science or of soul that will help it take root among stars? One of my favorite novelists, Toni Morrison, has been a whole book called *Paradise*, asking some of these same questions.

She creates this fictional town called Ruby, which is this all-black town in Oklahoma. It's founded by families who have been rejected even by other black folks for being too dark and too poor.

And they build this place, Ruby, as a refuge. And by the end of the novel, the men of that refuge have turned against a convent full of women just outside of town who are poor and inconvenient. The men murder them to keep their paradise pure. Morrison is not interested in telling you utopia is only a disease of whiteness.

[7:28] She is telling you that anybody, even the exiled, even the traumatized, even the righteous, can build a paradise with a locked gate.

If what you learned from your own wound was keep them out, instead of let nobody go through what I went through. A dangerous imagination still has to ask what assumption and whose assumptions are shaping the future that I'm building, that we are building, even when I'm the one who's been left out.

It reminds us that our wounds do not automatically make us wise. Sometimes they just make us armed. So this morning, we're going to explore a parable that I believe will help us consider these things more deeply, even as it does not allow easy interpretation.

In fact, I need to say right up front and be vulnerable that this parable has given me a lot of heartburn. A lot of heartburn. I usually like to preach.

I like to preach on complicated texts. It's fine. Ooh, it's complicated. But on Thursday night, when Julie was waiting for that sermon on Saturday, Julie's our administrator. She was waiting for the sermon on Friday.

[8:54] Ooh, the complicated no longer was cute. I got to tell you. I was like, what are you saying, Lord? In the churches that I grew up in, some of y'all might relate to this, you know, testimony was a really important part of our gathering.

And there would always be, like, some old head who would get up and tell this long, winding, unclear story that had a point. They would always have, like, this dramatic conversion story. And at some point, they would always end up, like, glorifying, like, really problematic behavior. Like, they wish they could go back to that. Y'all have experienced this, right? And they would always be, like, up there, like, talking about, like, drinking and womanizing, just, like, savoring it.

And you're like, isn't this about something? Where are we going? And you knew there was a point. You knew it had to have a point, and you just had to hang on for the ride. And I feel similarly about this morning's parable.

But even more, I think that if we listen closely to this text, it offers us a master class in something that maybe we don't talk about enough, how to actually read Scripture.

[10:08] Not how to master it the way you master a doctrine, but how to hold it and to let it hold you. So we're going to go together to Matthew 25, and I'm going to try something we haven't done in a while.

I'm going to read it. I invite you to go to your browser and to put in table.center, because there, in addition to being able to sign up for things, all the things for the sermon are there, like all the text that we're about to read is there.

Okay, this is Matthew 25, 1 through 13. The kingdom of heaven will be like this.

As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, Look, here is the bridegroom. Come out to meet him.

You had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves. 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.

[12:40] Okay? So I invite you again to find that on your phone. Find it in table.center. Take a minute. Move around the room in groups. Find some folks you don't know as well.

Sorry. It scarred me. I was a high school teacher. I loved it, and I remembered some of the readings I got on things. So stay in the text. What do you notice? And what are your honest questions? Right?

You deserve it You've been through so much Be blessed from the bottom of your feet To the crown
of your head Your life be blessed Your family be blessed Your finances be blessed Everything
about you Everything about you Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah Give it to Jesus Give it to Jesus Let go, let
go, let go And let God do a work in you In you, in you, in you Oh, be blessed Oh, be blessed
Whatever you're going through Just know I'm praying for you Be blessed

We'll be right back.

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We'll be right back.

We'll be right back.

[19:06] We'll be right back.

We'll be right back.

All right. Thank you so much for humoring me. If you are watching online, thank you so much. Hopefully, you got a chance to also look at the text. Maybe you called your cousin Nisi or something. I don't know to talk about it, but I hope you got a chance to discuss it as well. And I'm so curious about the questions you all had.

It's a lot. All right. But what we're going to do is start simple, all right? We're going to start simple before we get complicated. You got these 10 young women, bridesmaids. Some translations say virgins.

[20:42] They go out to meet a bridegroom. I don't know what's happening. But in the wedding custom of that time, one of the possibilities is that these bridesmaids, these women may have walked.

They may have been with the bride and then gone out to meet the bridegroom. And then they would take the bridegroom and the bride back to the groom's father's house.

And they would feast there. And right away from the start, one of the things that's clearest in the parable is this idea that five are foolish and five are wise. Even as all of them are carrying lamps, all of them fall asleep because the groom arrives like really, really late.

Like it says midnight. The better translation of that is in the middle of the night. Like it is late. The only difference between these bridesmaids on the surface is the flask of oil.

Five have extra. Five don't. Five don't. And when the shout finally goes out in the middle of the night, that's the one difference really in the story. This is a parable I'm guessing that might live somewhere in your consciousness with its line of keep alert.

[22:06] But which we, I mean this is true for me, may not have had actually taught on that often. The reading that I'm most familiar with takes the opening line at face value.

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. This is understood to be a picture of the world that God is bringing, the utopia we've been aching for our whole lives.

And the ending stills it, keep awake. Therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. And this reading has some gorgeous edges.

If we remember that parables are meant to be admired from a variety of perspectives. It confirms that there will be a wedding feast.

It assumes that we are invited to something joyful. That there is a moment out ahead of us that is coming toward us in which there will be flowers and dancing and vows all through the night.

[23:09] And I don't know about you, but I need to know that. That even as we might be uncertain about exactly how we think about the future, we can trust that something good is ahead.

Here in this reading, that takes every single word at face value. We learn that the timetable for the goodness is somewhere off in the future, but extremely uncertain.

It's an uncomfortable truth, but probably a truth that many of us experience in our own lives. We're looking for practical goodness around us. We learn that mostly we should expect it to require us to be adaptable.

To reveal more fully a God who cannot be controlled. And second, that traditional reading reminds us that in this reading, the oil is faithful living.

Most scholars agree on that. The oil represents faithful living. The oil that the bridesmaids possess or desire is about this willingness to follow instruction given by God and this willingness to apply it to the world and good deeds.

[24:27] Now one question that as I was reading that I kept coming back to was this. If you have a lamp and if you have oil, what is the spark that ignites the flame? And if you grew up in Sunday school like I did, of course your hand goes up and you say, Jesus, Jesus is the spark because Jesus is correct no matter what.

That's what you can always say, right? Doesn't matter what the teacher asks, you don't even hear the question. Jesus, it's Jesus. And you would be correct. But I also wonder if we assume a wedding and if we assume a delayed timetable, if the spark that we might need might have something to do with margin.

Margin that holds the possibility of rest and contemplation and the recognition of beauty on a daily basis. I wonder as we ready ourselves for a new rhythm of work and school as September approaches, how we are planning to build in margin.

This is a word for somebody. How are you planning to build in margin so that you can carry the oil of good deeds well? It's really clear that the traditional reading has real treasure.

And as we move through this sermon, I don't want to take that from you. But as some of your time and your groups might have revealed, really quickly with this passage that the questions start knocking.

[25 : 56] The New Testament commentator Debbie Thomas asked several really good questions plainly. In this parable, why are the bridesmaids so mean?

The wise ones? There are five women who could share and they refuse to. Why is the groom being late treated as normal instead of insulting?

Who is exactly running out to an oil shop in Jerusalem at midnight? For me, I was like, is that like searching for a 24-hour CVS?

Like, what is happening? You know, like you thought it was 24 hours, but it wasn't, so you got to go to the next one. And then where in this story about a wedding is the bride?

Where is the bride? And why is the groom so unkind to his own guests at the end of the parable? And here's one that unravels the tidy reading the fastest.

[27 : 00] Every single one of the bridesmaids falls asleep. They all fall asleep. Wise and foolish alike. So if the moral is keep awake, the story's own wise characters fell the standard.

If we're reading well, it becomes really clear really fast that this story is complicated, it's uncomfortable. New Testament scholar Greg Carey gets to the point when he names this discomfort plainly.

Is that how it works? That one apparently arbitrary decision marks the line between inclusion and exclusion from the ultimate party? This parable just doesn't feel like the gospel.

And yet, even if we stop here and acknowledge questions like the ones Debbie Thomas asked without reaching much further, there are still gems and treasures to be found.

And one that I really love without, again, digging far beyond the text, is the reality that the foolish bridesmaids could have simply chosen to not believe the others who said they wouldn't be enough.

[28 : 19] Instead of leaving, they could have stayed. They could have trusted that the bridegroom wanted their presence over their perfection. Thomas concludes her questioning with these words of identification with the foolish bridesmaids.

Again, I know somebody. This is a word that was speaking to me. I get how hard it is to stick around when my light is fading and my reserves are low. I get what it's like to scramble for perfection, to insist on having my ducks in a row before I show up in front of God or the church or the world.

After all, it's scary and vulnerable making to linger in the dark when my pitiful little lamp is flickering, my once robust faith is evaporating, and my measly leaky flask is filled with nothing but doubt and pain and grief and weariness.

Only a bridesmaid who trusts in the groom's deep and unconditional compassion. Only a bridesmaid who knows that the groom has light and oil to spare.

Only a bridesmaid who understands that her presence, messy and imperfect though it might be, is of intrinsic value to the groom.

[29 : 43] Only that bridesmaid will find the honesty and the courage to stay. We need to take that message to heart.

That question that, or that message that is there, if we just ask a few good questions about this passage. And yet it still doesn't quite make the story that much less messy.

So we're gonna go now where the real discomfort takes us because I think it's pointing somewhere true. Womanist scholar Mitzi J. Smith named something most of our interpretations work hard to soften.

This is the second in a set of three parables in a row where the writer of Matthew's gospel reaches for slavery as his central image for the kingdom of heaven.

Smith calls these parables Matthew's slave trilogy. And that should get our attention. Fernando Segovia calls Matthew's gospel conflicted.

[30 : 59] And one of the most well-known post-colonial theologians, Musa Dube, goes further naming Matthew as a document that even in its resistance still authorizes empire's logic in places.

I do not say that to hand you disillusionment. We're not gonna end disillusionment, so stay with me, okay? But I say it because we don't name enough that we have to be honest about harmful tensions that you see in the story.

Like asking the marginalized to arbitrarily wait for the good future. Just be patient. Just wait. Like expecting them to be hyper-vigilant in order to conform to the whims of society, to just be respectable.

And watch out that you are respectable enough. Using punishment as an answer to non-conformity. Smith, who if you read her, you're always gonna get in trouble. She puts it like this. Masters in oppressive systems desire wise virgins, but wise in their unwavering submission to the system regardless of circumstance.

[32 : 23] Foolish virgins are feared because the system cannot control them. Their presence is a threat to the system and the authority of their masters.

For me, as a black woman, that is deeply unsettling and as a Christ follower, it feels extremely problematic. And there is something else here that I think might hold the key.

The word translated wise is phrenonymous. It refers to practical wisdom, conventional wisdom, the kind of shrewdness that carries the nuance of looking out for its own interests first.

The wise are phrenonymous. It's not the same word for wisdom, Sophia, that's used throughout the New Testament for deep divine wisdom, the wisdom of God.

The writer of Matthew knew both words and he chooses phrenonymous, which means that just as this parable might be teaching us something about the nature of wisdom, it might be using the traditional style of wisdom literature, wit, exaggeration, even a little theological trolling to make you argue with the story instead of just swallowing it.

[33 : 49] Maybe the first hearers of this text had the same reaction that some of you might have this morning, that this is not a party that you want to go to. That maybe this party offers a counterfeit version of the real thing that it takes wisdom to discern.

And maybe, too, the counsel is not to be like the wise bridesmaids, but to rather be like the foolish, the ones considered impractical and lazy, the daydreamers.

If that sounds off-putting, remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians, if you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise.

for the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. So which horizon does this parable actually point us toward?

Remember July of 1969? One horizon said the future belongs to whoever gets there first, plants a flag, claims the frontier before anybody else does.

[35 : 04] the wise bridesmaids in this story are living inside of that horizon. Guard your oil, protect your seat at the table, tell the ones running low to fend for themselves.

The other horizon, Mount Morris Park, 300,000 people over six Sundays who came together in the heat rather than watch a man plant a flag on the moon.

This is the horizon that says the future isn't your prize, it isn't your race alone.

It's something you build shoulder to shoulder or you don't really get there at all. Toni Morrison's all black town of Ruby thought it had chosen the second horizon but it built the first instead.

And you do