

Share and Share Alike: *Matthew 25:1-13*

Norwalk Christian Church, September 22, 2018, Proper 20, Year B (Non-lectionary, R U Kidding Series)

When I was about thirteen I received the birthday invitation of my lifetime. A little girl in my church whom I had been buddies with since her birth was having her 3rd birthday party. It was 1993, and the biggest thing around was Barney the Dinosaur, and she loved Barney. And her parents loved her.

So they wanted to make her 3rd birthday a party to remember. They invited her friends. Made a birthday cake. Had some party favors, and then checked the local costume shops and found the main party attraction, a purple dinosaur costume.

Now, copyright law did not allow this costume shop to call it a “Barney the Dinosaur” costume and, well, the costume itself didn’t really allow it to be called a Barney costume either. It was certainly purple and dinosaur like. And, if you used your imagination just a little, as Barney exhorts us to do, you could see that, maybe, it looked, well, a little like Barney the Dinosaur.

It wasn’t perfect, but it was the one they could afford. And they invited me to put on the suit and surprise their daughter.

And I was ecstatic. I worked hard on my best Barney the Dinosaur voice, learned all lines: “Using your imagination is so much fun.” And, particularly apt for this sermon, “Sharing means caring.” I practiced--but never quite achieved--that Barney ballet jump.

And on the day of the party, I put the suit on and surprised the kids, walking out from behind the house in this ratty-looking Purple Dinosaur costume. And the little girl rushed over to me, hugged me as tight as she could, and said, “Barney! You’re here!”

It wasn’t a destination birthday party, but her backyard. The costume was far from authentic. The party favors came from Dollar Tree. The cake was homemade from a box. Yet still today, that little girl who is now, well, a full-grown adult, will tell you that that was one of the best parties of her childhood.

We adults could learn something from children.

It seems these days the expectations have been raised. For a good birthday party, everything has to be perfect. Rent out the best facility. Take the kids on a trip of a lifetime. Spend and charge, so kids can have the best memories.

But chances are, our kids might have been just as excited, maybe even more so, by a wanna-be Barney costume in our backyard.

Kids learn the expectation from their parents, so that when they grow up and get married, they think it has to be the best. The best clothes. The best location. The best food. And they begin their marriage with a mountain of debt in order to have a perfect wedding, setting the expectation that the marriage, too, must always be perfect.

When Marti and I tell do premarital counseling, we always tell them that everything could go wrong--the flowers might die, the DJ play the wrong song, the dress tears, the best man passes out, the ring bearer acts up, the cake falls over--but no matter what happens, we're still going to sign the license and you're still going to get married and your day will be a success.

We have so much stress over throwing the perfect party, when we read this parable of Jesus this morning, we can relate.

We thought our wedding festivities were big, but first century Jewish weddings were a site to behold. They went on for a week. It was a whole-town celebration. And the pressure was on to do it right.

But from the beginning of the story, we realize this is not the perfect wedding. The bride and bridegroom aren't even there, and everyone keeps waiting and waiting, so long, everyone fell asleep. Talk about a party-killer.

Here's where this story gets a little troublesome. We're told from the outset of the story there are 5 wise bridesmaids at this wedding and 5 foolish bridesmaids. Talk about prejudicing our reading of this story, for when the 5 foolish bridesmaids announce that they don't have enough oil to keep burning their lamps all night waiting for the delinquent bride and groom, we are quick to judge them.

The 5 QUOTE "Wise" bridesmaids say, "Well, we aren't sharing our oil with you. Go get your own." And we shame the 5 foolish bridesmaids for not being prepared.

Be prepared, we hear the old timey preacher yell. Be prepared, for you never know what hour the Son of Man will appear!

I could end the sermon there, throw in a dash of guilt for all the many ways you are not prepared for Jesus' return, and then offer an altar call.

That'd be easier. But as we said a few weeks ago, this parable is from the Gospel--this is supposed to be good news--and we aren't leaving today until we find that good news.

Our worship series is all about the lessons children can teach us. So, what can children teach us about this parable?

“Sharing means caring,” that’s what the purple dinosaur said at that 3-year-old’s party. But this parable seems to say otherwise. Be prepared. Take care of your own self.

Oil lamps aren’t party essentials these days, so maybe it’s hard to put ourselves into this parable. But imagine it’s a BYOB party, and someone brought nothing. Do you share your B, so that they have some, and risk running out? Do you reward their unpreparedness? They should’ve read the Facebook invite properly, like I did!

I remember the very first Norwalk Lion’s Club Lobster Dinner Marti and I went to. It was the first time we went out without baby Oliver. We were so glad to be out, we didn’t prepare at all. We had no idea what to expect. We showed up with nothing, while everyone else was unloading their drinks, their placemats, their appetizers and desserts and lobster claw crushers. We were unprepared!

But then Kathy Rinard lent us her lobster eating tools (which I ended up breaking, by the way). And someone showed us how to eat a lobster. And our table shared appetizers and desserts. And Betsy Durham gave me a beer. And because of the generosity of our fellow party-goers, we had the best night out.

Because that’s what community does for one another. Perhaps we are reading this parable wrong.

We put so much pressure on ourselves to get everything right. To throw the best parties. To be the best person. To be the best spouse, best parent, best Christian.

But here’s the truth: we aren’t perfect and we never will be. We will mess up. We will forget. At some point, we will be prepared. We will fail. We will let someone down. We will drop the ball. We will not bring enough oil.

And we read this parable and think--yes, I knew it all along. I’m a failure. I’m unprepared for life, let alone eternity. God has certainly shut the door on me.

It’s easy to forget the rest of scripture when reading this parable, given how we read scripture on Sundays, looking at just a few verses out of context. But only two chapters earlier in Matthew, Jesus says, “Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces.” God doesn’t shut the door.

And in case you think this parable is telling us not to share, just 17 verses later, Jesus tells another parable about sheep and goats, and says that we should help those in need.

Maybe this parable isn’t about God shutting the door on the unprepared, but it’s about how those 5 - QUOTE - “Foolish” bridesmaids felt when they were unprepared.

We know how they feel. When we don't get it right. When we're worn out, burnt out, put out, left out, tired out, and feel like we've been chewed up and spat out. We. know. how. it. feels.

But guess what--so does everyone else. Look around! None of us are good enough. And even the QUOTE "Wise" bridesmaids, had they waited a little bit longer, would've also run out of oil.

Maybe this parable isn't judging us for being unprepared, but instead, it's inviting us to relax. To let ourselves off the hook and go easy on ourselves. To realize the party is never perfect, nor are we. So borrow someone's lobster claw crushers and beer. Lend each other oil. Share with others, but--maybe even harder--accept the generosity of others.

Because, more often than not, we--not others and not God--*we* are usually the ones who shut ourselves off from the party, because we believe that we, in our imperfection and unpreparedness, could never be worthy.

The bridesmaid's mistake in this story was not that they didn't bring enough oil. Their mistake was that they left. They went out, trying to buy oil at midnight, trying to put on the perfect show, trying to be the best, and in trying to be perfect, they missed the party.

But what do you think was going to happen? When the bride and bridegroom arrives, they're not going to care. "So your lamp is out. That's okay. We were late arriving. We're so glad you are here! Come into the party. There's plenty of light in here."

The reality is, sometimes this world can be a dark place. Sometimes we let ourselves down. Sometimes our families and church families let us down. Sometimes we're not prepared for the darkness when it comes.

That's why we have this community. But whatever we do, in our tiredness and brokenness and darkness, in those sacred moments when we are all out, do not leave.

Stay. Lean on each other. Share and share alike, our oil, our resources--sometimes our faith. Because it's hard to believe in the dark. But don't leave. Don't give up.

We wait. We stay with each other. We help each other. Because, though delayed, Jesus is coming.

And no matter what we have or think we should have, no matter how perfect we are, or how amazingly imperfect. No matter how patiently we have waited, when we knock on the door, Jesus always opens the door.

"Welcome in my good and faithful servant. Come out of the darkness, for there is always plenty of light in here."