

Mile 21: Oil Shortage

March 14, 2021

Bendersville and Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 25:1-13

Quick show of hands: have any of you ever watched the TV show “Bridezillas?”

The gist of it is this: TV crews follow around a bride and groom while they are working on their wedding planning, and usually the couple has crazy, lavish, over-the-top expectations for their wedding. Sometimes the price tags for some of these weddings are up in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. And as the bride gets closer and closer and closer to the big day, and gets more and more anxious and overwhelmed by the magnitude of what she has gotten herself into, every bad-mannered, frightful bone in her body starts to go haywire and she turns into someone completely unrecognizable – ultimately threatening the success of the marriage to come.

There. That’s the plot of every episode of the TV show. Now you don’t have to watch it.

In the United States, the wedding industry is insane. In the year 2013, it was a \$53.4 billion industry. Not worldwide – just in the United States. Between bachelor and bachelorette parties, and flowers, and hair and makeup, and clothing and jewelry and other accessories. Food, and catering, and a DJ, and venue costs. Honeymoon. And that’s just where everything starts. Some weddings will have ice sculptures, and live butterfly releases, and live orchestras, and cakes totaling thousands upon thousands of dollars. And the more details that go into planning a wedding, the more opportunities there are for things to go wrong.

When I meet with couples planning their weddings, I always tell them to plan for the reality that on the day of the wedding *something* will not go according to plan. Sometimes, a lot of somethings. And that is just a preparation for married life. A life requiring constant adjustment when life throws us inevitable curveballs.

At David’s and my wedding, we chose the church where we got married based on the fact that the church had a big, beautiful pipe organ. And I wanted most of the wedding music to feature the organ. We even flew in an organist for the service itself – and I loaded him up with some pretty challenging and carefully-selected organ pieces. Not your traditional wedding music.

The organist had planned out and prepared – and carefully timed – 30 minutes of preservice music. Everything was going according to plan. The organist started playing. People started arriving. I was carefully tucked away in the bride’s room putting on the finishing touches. David and the groomsmen and the three pastors who were

performing the service (yes, it took 3 pastors to marry us) were getting themselves settled and ready.

And at that moment, about 10 minutes into the preservice music, the organ ciphers.

Now, this isn't something you have to worry about with an electric organ. But with a pipe organ, a cipher during a performance is an organist's worst nightmare. Basically, what happens, is that the air from the organ bellows is blowing pretty much constantly, as long as the organ is on. And there is a little valve on every single pipe that opens and closes, either sealing the pipe and blocking off the air, or opening the pipe and allowing the air to enter, which makes the organ sound.

But once in a rare while, usually due to dust or dirt, the valve doesn't seal properly. And so air leaks into the pipe and you get a stuck note, or a cipher. It sounds like a constant and unrelenting wheeeeeeeeeeee!

So, the organ ciphered. The organist turned the organ off, and the sound stopped. Then he turned it back on again. Wheeeeeeeee! Someone sent word to David what was going on, and his orders were very clear: "Melissa is not to find out about this until after the service." And at that point, my grandfather climbed up into the organ chambers – where all of the tens of thousands of organ pipes are housed, he located the problem pipe, and he pulled the pipe out to stop the noise.

Every wedding has *something* that doesn't go quite right.

In the New Testament times, weddings looked a *lot* different than they do today. Today, we place pretty much all of the emphasis on the *day of* the wedding. That is the day that two people are legally and spiritually bound together as one. There is the ceremony, then there is usually a reception or a party that follows, and then the husband and wife ride off into the sunset.

But in Biblical times, things were a bit different. A marriage was as much a business contract between two families as it was two people declaring their undying love to each other. Arranged marriages were the norm, and a man and a woman would become legally married at the time of their betrothal – basically their engagement – when the father of the groom would "pay a dowry" to the father of the bride – basically compensating the bride's father for the loss of income that he would experience when his daughter moved out of his house and into her new husband's house. And usually, that would be a corner of the house of the groom's father. None of these "newlywed starter homes" – the bride would literally leave her family and join his.

So the bride and groom would be married. Most of the vows and the pledges and the promises and the legal mumbo jumbo would take place at the time of betrothal. But they would not consummate the marriage until the time of the wedding.

And in that time and in that culture, the wedding was basically just a big party, celebrating the wife moving into the husband's house. There'd be a big procession, where the bride would literally be carried from her home to her groom's home. There'd be a big feast that night, and usually the groom would stay out partying in the street and the bride would be tucked away somewhere quiet. That party usually continued into the next day too, and would sometimes last for days and days, but at some point the groom would disappear and married life would begin in earnest.

So in Matthew 25, Jesus tells the story of a wedding. And at this wedding, everything is all set up. The bride's friends are there, and the groom's friends are there, and the families are there. The whole community has come out for what would amount to a big, lavish block party. And they are all lined up in the street, ready to sing songs and celebrate the wife's journey from the home of her childhood to her new home with her husband. The party is set to go into the evening, probably until after dark, and so in these days without electricity, everybody has brought with them their little handheld lamp. And some folks anticipated the possibility that the party could run late, and so they brought some extra oil for their lamp, just in case.

These people were smart. Because something always happens in a wedding. Always. Modern weddings and ancient weddings – it doesn't matter. Something. Always. Happens. And in this case, it is a big something. We're not talking about a little organ cipher here. This time, the problem is the groom. The groom is nowhere to be found. Some traditions would have the groom in his home, anxiously awaiting the arrival of his bride; and in other traditions the groom would actually go to the bride's home and accompany the bride to his house. But here, the groom isn't in either place. He is MIA.

The people are waiting. They are milling around and chatting, and it starts to get later, and later, and later. So late that the entire crowd actually dozed off, right there in the middle of the street. No going home to catch some shut-eye, because they didn't want to miss the groom if and when when he finally *did* show up. They couldn't just call him on his cell phone to find out where he was, because...well...it was the first century.

So finally, at about midnight, the groom makes an appearance. Everyone wakes up, and trims the wick down on their lamps, and lights their lamps, but about half of the bridesmaids realize that when they had fallen asleep, they had forgotten to blow out the candles, and their lamps had burned up all of the oil while they were waiting. They asked their friends for some of their extra oil, but their friends had only brought enough for themselves. And so these unlucky bridesmaids had to leave the procession and go

the store to get oil for their lamps, and they missed the groom. The party started without them. And once the party started, nobody would be let in.

Alright, so we have been talking for the last several weeks – since the start of Lent – about some of the hard, challenging, sometimes even grueling, annoying, frustrating stories in the second half of Matthew’s gospel, and comparing these stories to the process of running a marathon during the hardest stretch, when our legs are tired and our heart is tired and our lungs are tired and our mental reserve and energy stores are just plain wiped out. And this story really, really fits the bill for a tough passage of scripture – for Mile 21 of our 26-mile marathon. It leaves us with so many questions. Where was the groom and why was he so late? Was it normal for the groom not to show up until the middle of the night? Why wouldn’t the wise bridesmaids share their oil? Wouldn’t that have been the kind thing to do? The self-sacrificing thing to do? And what would’ve been so bad about opening the gates of the town and letting the bridesmaids back in? Especially since it wasn’t exactly their fault that the night hadn’t gone according to plan?

And while every one of these is a totally valid question, and maybe these five foolish bridesmaids did get the short end of the stick, here’s the deeper truth in this story: *(And it’s the same truth that I lecture engaged couples on, over and over and over again when planning a wedding):*

Life can be challenging. It throws us curveballs. We don’t always know what to expect. We might think that we have enough oil to last us until the evening is over and it’s time to go on home, but the groom might be late. We might think we have enough gas in our car to get us to the next gas station, and we probably do, until we come upon a wreck on the highway and have to detour 20 miles around and all of a sudden that little bit of gas just isn’t enough anymore. We might think we have enough time to *(fill in the blank)*, until this unexpected thing happens, or that crisis hits, and all of a sudden we wake up and wonder where in the world all that time went.

We may think we are happy, healthy, on-track, holding all of the pieces of life together if only just barely sometimes, and then WHAM. A global pandemic. WHAM WHAM. Social and political unrest. WHAM WHAM WHAM. A loved one dies. Another loved one is hospitalized. We get hit with an unseasonably cold and snowy winter. Plans are put off. We have to learn to change the ways we do things. We start to lose patience. General grumpiness starts to set in. The sun starts to go down and the bridegroom still isn’t here – we *still* can’t get an appointment for the vaccine and things *still* aren’t back to normal again and we’ve just *had it* already, and to make matters worse, we are running out of oil. We thought we had enough patience and strength and wherewithal to get through everything intact, and maybe we did a year ago when everyone was talking “two weeks. Or maybe a month. At most. And then we can go back to normal again.” But dusk fades into nighttime and the bridegroom still isn’t here, and we are tired and frustrated and

our eyelids are getting heavy and we just can't stay awake anymore waiting. Because the waiting has gone on long enough and it's just gotten downright unbearable.

"Life *will* throw you curveballs," Jesus is telling us. "That is a *promise*. It is not *if* but *when*. So in anticipation of that, here's what you need to do: Carry extra oil. No matter where you go. Whether you think you need it or not."

And what does that look like? It looks like making the intentional effort to feed and tend our souls, day after day, after day. It means making a practice of continually filling our tanks so that we don't run out of gas 3 hours in, or 12 hours in, or one year in. Taking the time to connect with other people, even when it is tempting to retreat into loneliness and isolation. Praying, even when we don't have the words – sometimes, silence is the best prayer that we have to offer, anyway. Turning to the words and the stories of scripture and allowing them to shape and for us – even when those stories feel challenging and annoying and they push our buttons and leave us with more questions than answers. It means taking time for rest – for sabbath – for renewal. Not burning our lamps 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, but taking the time to turn off everything and just BE. It means sleeping, and feeding our bodies real food, and finding a way to move our bodies as best we can, and spending time outside in the sunshine, and caring for this temple of the Holy Spirit that we call our bodies. Because when our bodies wear out, quite often our spirit is very quick to follow.

And when we can do this, the night might still be long, and we might still doze off in the street waiting for the bridegroom to come; waiting for the promise of Easter – the promise of Resurrection – the promise of life abundant – the promise of a more glorious future ahead. The waiting may still be hard. The curveballs of life may still be hard to manage. But that little bit of extra oil in the lamps of our souls will keep us burning until it is time for the great wedding party to begin.