

Jesus' parables often begin with the words: "the kingdom of God will be like..." Then he goes on to give us a picture of something that doesn't look at all like what we imagine God's kingdom to be like: a mustard seed, a batch of yeast, a treasure hidden in a field, laborers in a vineyard, or, as in this case, bridesmaids at a wedding banquet. Gosh, I hope we don't all have to dress in those ridiculous outfits!

Last week I was walking a labyrinth, trying to pray this parable, but I kept running into problems. It just seemed so unfair and unforgiving. All these questions kept coming to me: Why did the wise bridesmaids refuse to share with the foolish ones? And why would they be so cruel as to send them out into the night without a light to try to buy oil? It's not as if there were a 24-hour convenience store just down the street. And when the bridegroom finally comes and the foolish bridesmaids return, why does he say that he doesn't know

them? Would you send half your wedding party away simply because they were late to the reception? We assume that the bridegroom is Jesus. But if that's the case, he doesn't act very much like the Jesus I have come to know.

The more I wrestled with this parable the more upset I got. I wanted to take the side of those foolish bridesmaids and keep banging on the door for them until Jesus let us all in. By the time I finished walking, I was feeling anxious and that is the opposite of what is supposed to happen on a labyrinth. I knew that the moral of this story is: keep awake, be ready, you never know what or who is coming. And I couldn't help but leave the labyrinth with the unsettling feeling that I was the one who wasn't ready.

How many of you had that feeling as the fires were burning up north? Do you have an evacuation plan? Do you have an emergency kit ready to grab and go? Do you have all

your papers in a safe place? I don't. And we know that we have to stop saying "it can't happen here" because we know it can.

Most of the time, I have to admit that I'm not thinking about fires or floods or earthquakes or church shootings, but I still feel unready, unready to deal with daily life, let alone big disasters. And I don't think I'm alone.

Everyone seems to be a little on edge these days. Anxiety is in the air and on the rise. Back in the 1990's, we worried about depression. We called ourselves Prozac Nation. Today, we are more accurately called Xanax Nation. Our teens are growing up in a stew of anxiety: 38% of girls and 26% of boys ages 13 to 17 suffer from an anxiety disorder, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. What is going on? Where are we going wrong?

Living where we do, we worry about the "Big One," the earthquake that will hit the Hayward fault and could literally change the shape of the East Bay for decades to come. But we

all know that there are smaller earthquakes every day, and they are slowly but ever so surely moving the ground under our feet. Likewise, cultural quakes are happening all the time. We've had some pretty big jolts lately. It's a wonder we all don't have PTSD. So it doesn't seem like Jesus needs to tell us to "keep awake" because so many of us are living on high alert all the time.

And whether we admit it or not, we know that something has to give. Sometimes, all I want to do is just yell, "Stop!" Sometimes we have this notion that if we could just get off the roller coaster, if we could drop out of the rat race, get out of the valley, we would have the chance to let our heart rate return to something like normal. We could remember to breathe and begin to think. We could let ourselves feel the feelings. And if we could unclench for a moment, we would probably collapse and sleep for a month. But eventually, we would get up and look around and see things with much clearer,

keener vision. We could take stock of our situation, and it would surprise us how quickly we could discern for ourselves what to do, what needed to change, what we needed to give up in order to go on.

There is a term for this full stop that we wish we could engineer. You don't need an app for it. You can't find it on Amazon. You can find it in the Bible. It's called Sabbath. It comes from a Hebrew word that means "rest." It means to cease to do and simply to be. Last week, we had a celebration of our children's ministries, and we called it "Children's Sabbath." But I'll tell you it's their parents, it's the grown-ups who really need one.

I remember how I used to love the academic calendar: nine months to study hard and three months to rest and recreate. That way you got refreshed before you had to do it all over again. When the class was over, it was over. You never had to go back again. And because there was always a neat

and tidy end to one school year, there was always the chance you could make a brand new beginning the next year.

Unless you become a teacher, when you leave school, you pretty much give up on the notion of Sabbath. There is no time that is sacred anymore. Before it ever arrives, it's already spent. Like the oil in the foolish maidens' lamps, there isn't enough of it to get us through the night, let alone the next day and the next and the next. And so we are in a perpetual panic, a constant state of unreadiness. It's only when we crash and burn or get sick or our kid is in crisis or we have a parent go to the hospital or to the mortuary that we see how foolish this all is.

When we are sitting in the dark because our lamp has burned out, where is Jesus when we really need him? Does he shut us fools out because he does not know us or do we shut ourselves out because we don't know him?

To answer that question, I want to take you to a different banquet. This one is in Luke 14. Jesus tells of a person who planned a big dinner and invited everyone on the A-list, but they all had excuses for why they couldn't come. They had better things to do. So the master told his servant to go out into the streets and bring in the poor and the disabled. Still there was room. So the master sent the slave out again to round up anyone he could find to fill the banquet hall. [Luke 14:16-24]

Now were these people ready to come to the party? Did they have enough oil in their lamps? Were they wearing the proper attire? Did they bring a housewarming gift? No. No. No. No. But they were hungry enough that they didn't hesitate to respond to the invitation; they showed up. The master forgave them for not being ready and fed them anyway.

My friends, we are hungry, too. And we don't have better things to do than to party with Jesus. Just RSVP and show up.

You don't need to bring anything. Come as you are. If you wait until you think you are ready, you'll miss the party of eternity. Like the hymn in our hymnal, "Come, ye weary, heavy laden, lost and ruined by the fall; if you tarry 'til you're better, you will never come at all."

We have long struggled here to offer some sense of Sabbath to our busy grownups. Usually that's taken the form of small groups or Bible studies or book studies and even though we have sent our servants out to try to round you up, we have yet to find a good way to get you to stop, rest, be. Our latest attempt was a self-care retreat at Woodhaven last month. Kudos to the ten who calendared the retreat and didn't hit "delete." Just like the Jews do, this Sabbath went from sun-down Friday to sun-down Saturday. That was almost long enough to come to a full stop, almost enough time to take stock and figure out what needs to change. We hope to offer more opportunities to do that in the future.

For now, the question remains whether we are going to be wise or foolish when it comes to maintaining our sanity and saving our souls. I know that a lot of you would love to obey the commandment to "honor the Sabbath and keep it holy" but you can't. Some of you are dying to take a sabbatical, but you won't. So I have an idea. If you won't take a Sabbath, find someone to give you one. Make a pact with a spouse or a friend or family member to do whatever it takes so you can give each other a rest. With their support, you can take off three days or a whole week, and you can help them do the same. A group of friends could promise to give each other what the world will not give them. This is what I call filling up each others' lamps, and it is the way I wish the story in Matthew's Gospel had ended.

One of the great things about the parables of Jesus is that they are open-ended. They can hold so many different truths for different people living at different times and facing

different challenges. We get to figure out what truth they hold for us here and now and how they apply to us today. So here is my vision of the life Jesus wants for us and the task that Jesus puts before us: the wise bridesmaids stay behind so they can fill up the lamps of the foolish ones and then, when they are all rested and ready, they go arm-in-arm together into the presence of Jesus. The kingdom's a party. Your name is the guest list. Clear your calendar. This is one party you don't want to miss!