

Kafkaesque is something that is reminiscent of the oppressive or frightening qualities of Franz Kafka's fictional world. Kafka was a Czech who wrote novels and short stories in a unique style. One of my favorite his novels is *The Castle*, and it is infuriating. The main character, who is only known as K, arrives in a village where he is supposed to work as a land surveyor. The rest of the story involves him struggling through a bureaucratic nightmare to reach mysterious authorities who govern from a castle. At every turn, he encounters setbacks. He thinks that he is supposed to do something, but he meets another hindrance or holdup.

It reminds me of the parable of the ten bridesmaids because they are all expecting to go to the banquet but five run out of oil and the story punishes their unpreparedness. We read this story and go straight to the obvious message: be prepared. With Jesus, stories have a deeper message. This is no exception. The worst part about *The Castle* is Kafka died before finishing it. So, after 350 pages, the story stops. It does not end. It just stops.¹

When reading about the parable of the ten bridesmaids, I think about Kafka because the story does not make sense to me. Why would five bridesmaids be excluded from the banquet because they let their lamp go out? The story is strange. If God loved these bridesmaids, why exclude them from some divine banquet? This story collapses the space between now and the time of Jesus, both the historical Jesus and the future eschaton. Time moves forward yet we look in both directions, backward and forward. Someday the world will end, life will end. This is the eschaton, this final event. As we move closer to a promised end, we look back at the historical Jesus to better understand where the world is going.

In the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 23-25 are Jesus' judgment discourse. Matthew brings it together from various sources. We find whole phrases, copied verbatim from Mark, there are some quotes from a lost source called Q, and a few places that are original to Matthew. The speech begins with Jesus addressing the crowds and disciples. He looks at the present and explores the way God judges the present. Then, in chapters 24-25, he talks just to the disciples.²

The theme is the future. How do we live today to be ready for the end of time? This is a big question. Kierkegaard writes, "All who are expecting [something] do have one thing in common, that they are expecting something in the future, because expectancy and the future are inseparable ideas."³ Jesus knows that people look ahead and expect something. In chapter 24, we find the "little apocalypse" which is about the end of the age, foretelling persecution and desolating sacrilege.

If there is no future, there is not past. "If there is neither future nor past, then [humanity] would be in bondage like an animal," with our heads "bowed to the earth and our souls captive to the service of the moment."⁴ What we do today is connected with the

past, present, and future. We can react to the past, live in the present, and think about the future.

We are not "captive to the service of the moment." We are capable of seeing God and responding. "The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids" is unique to Matthew. Neither of the other two synoptic gospels have it, nor does the lost source Q. It connects with the immediately preceding verses and maintains the theme and connection with the rest of the judgment discourse. Why do we care about the judgment discourse? Will it help us in work or school or at play? Yes, because this story is about life. It is about the kind of life we experience every day. It is about looking at our past and envisioning a bright future.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids does not start a fresh new chapter. The Bible was not written with chapters and verses. In the New Testament, chapters came centuries later. Different people introduced different numbering systems in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁵ The parable of the ten bridesmaids is not a discreet unity. It connects with the verses before and after, and it is part of a wider story, both the entire message of Matthew and the judgment discourse. Matthew 24:51, says, "He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This is closer to Greek cultural notions of death than Hebrew theology. The thought continues in 25:1, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this."

Parables are supposed to be believable. Why did the bridegroom arrive at midnight? Where is the bride? There is no mention of her. The story suggests that shops would be open at midnight, so the foolish bridesmaids could rush out to buy more oil. This assumption seems unlikely. Instead of a parable, this is an allegory, which is a significant distinction. A parable is a story that teaches a lesson. An allegory reveals hidden meaning. Jesus shares hidden meaning about the future and how we should live in the present.

The bridegroom is Jesus arriving at the eschaton. This imagery is clear from the rest of Matthew (e.g. 9:15; 22:1-3). The bridesmaids represent the church.⁶ Right now, we are a *corpus mixtum*, "a mixed body of both good and bad members."⁷ Matthew does not think that the bridegroom's delay specifies a longer delay. Both the foolish bridesmaids and the wise ones were mistaken. The bridegroom (Jesus) arrives at the appropriate time. The bridegroom's arrival marks the end of time. Gene Boring writes, "The futile attempt to buy oil after the arrival of the bridegroom, though historically unrealistic, shows the futility of trying to prepare when it is too late."⁸

"Keep awake" is the final word, but they all slept, even the wise bridesmaids. In this *corpus mixtum* of today's church, both the good and the bad ones do sleep. Today, we fight to stay awake, to be present and mindful of God's work in our world and our lives. We are easily distracted by the horrors of life in the twenty-first century. Even though there are natural disasters and personal ones, once again, we look for words to respond to another

mass shooting. Some suggest a link between vitriolic political discourse and increased violence.⁹ Others argue that "more guns mean more deaths from crime and accidents."¹⁰ What is the answer? How can we respond, not just to the most recent mass shooting, but to everything we encounter?

The answer is: this is God's world and we are in it. We have a calling. And, we have the tools to react. We can bring peace to war and violence. We can speak words of love and reconciliation where we find division. Unlike K., the protagonist of *The Castle*, we can be prepared. We can make progress. We can live in a state of expectation and realization. We expect God's beautiful future, and we realize God is already at work in this world.

¹ Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Mark Harman (New York: Schocken, 1998).

² M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 428-29.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong, trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong, vol. V, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 17.

⁴ Kierkegaard, V, 17.

⁵ Walter F. Specht, "The Oxford Guide to Ideas & Issues of the Bible," ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 89.

⁶ Boring, 450.

⁷ Petri Luomanen, "Corpus Mixtum: An Appropriate Description of Matthew's Community?," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 3 (1998).

⁸ Boring, 450.

⁹ U. Philips Susan, "Vitriol and Civility in U.S. Political Discourse: An Aftermath of the Giffords Attempted Assassination," *Anthropology Now* 3, no. 3 (2011).

¹⁰ Franklin E. Zimring, "Firearms, Violence and Public Policy," *Scientific American* 265, no. 5 (1991).