

November 12, 2023

PARTICIPATION MATTERS, BUT NOT JUST FOR THE TROPHY

Matthew 25:1-13

I have participated in a few sports and games during my time at school, but you will never know it because I have nothing to show for my participation. I was not particularly good at any sport, and that's just a nice way of saying that I sucked at most. I never won any trophies or awards, and in those days, you did not get a ribbon or medal for participation, but I participated anyway.

I am reminded of an interesting conversation a dad shared that he had with his son as he took him to baseball practice. His son asked him: "Daddy, do we get trophies for playing baseball this spring?" He answered: "No, but you do get to go out and run around and have lots of fun while learning to play". "OK!" his son said, then he turned and ran out on the field for the start of his practice.

I think that father got it right. Participation matters, but not just for the trophy. Participation matters, not only in sports but in all of life. Participation matters in the Kingdom of God and not just for the rewards - we can draw that lesson from the parable told in today's Gospel reading.

The parable speaks of ten bridesmaids who were invited to participate in a wedding ceremony. They were awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom, and he was late - extremely late. They waited until their energy and their enthusiasm waned, and they fell asleep.

That is understandable; it happens to us, too - waiting drains our energy and dilutes our enthusiasm. There have been many times when we set out on a pursuit or offered ourselves in service with great energy and enthusiasm. We were excited; we were bursting with ideas; we had great expectations; good things were going to happen and happen quickly. We showed up, we did what we had to do, and we waited, and waited, and waited, but we didn't see what we expected to see. The change did not happen, at least not as quickly as we thought. Gradually, our energy evaporated, and our enthusiasm waned. We didn't quite give up, but we gave in - we gave in to discouragement and despair. We surrendered to a state of drowsiness and apathy. We may have been physically present, but that was about it.

That can and often happens when waiting is prolonged. Whether it is waiting for a breakthrough in our health, finances, relationships, a cause that we champion, or an increase in the vibrancy and growth of our congregation, prolonged waiting gets to us.

That was the state of all ten bridesmaids; the waiting got to them, and they fell asleep. They all fell asleep, but in the parable, five of them were described as wise and five as foolish. What was different between the two sets? From the parable, we see that it had to do with how they approached the invitation to participate in the ceremony. Those who were wise went prepared with extra oil, so that when, after a prolonged wait, the bridegroom finally arrived, they were ready to participate. Those described as foolish did not go prepared to wait, and so were not ready to participate when the time came.

Let me give a little background here. During the time when this parable was told, the practice at weddings was for the groom to go with his friends to the bride's house on the evening of the wedding day. They would collect the bride and her friends, and they would then process back to the groom's house with singing and dancing. The invited guests would form a lamplight procession back to the groom's house, where the banquet would take place. That is why, in the parable, the bridesmaids were waiting with their lamps.

The invitation that the bridesmaids received was primarily an invitation to participate in the procession and all that went along with it. It was during the procession that the bride and the groom were put on display, as it were. It was during the procession that they were introduced to the community, welcomed, affirmed and celebrated by all. That was the most important and significant part of the ceremony. The banquet was but the culmination.

The wise bridesmaids went prepared to participate in the procession and all that it involved and signified. The foolish bridesmaids apparently went with their eyes on the banquet; they took just enough oil to get them there. That would explain why, when they turned up after the procession was over, presumably with oil and their lamps lit, they were refused entry to the banquet.

The foolish bridesmaids were excluded because they didn't quite grasp the significance of the occasion. The invitation was about the procession and less so about the banquet. When they missed the procession, they missed the part that mattered most.

Where do we stand, among the wise or the foolish? As we go about our various pursuits, are we missing out on those things in life that matter most?

God invites all of us to a life of purpose and significance, not just privilege and success - a life that elevates and enriches, and when we participate in life, not only for the reward we may receive but in order to add value and give meaning to our lives and the lives of others, we are engaging ourselves in that which matters most.

When we seek for significance, not just success, it is easier for us to keep going when things are not turning out as we expect, because we know that we are involved in something greater than ourselves.

So we can continue to love even when that love is not being returned. We can continue to seek reconciliation even when obstacles continue to emerge. We can continue to work for justice, even when the structures that promote injustice appear to be unyielding. We can continue to hope even when all seems lost. We can continue to offer ourselves in service even when change and renewal are slow in coming. And when our energy wanes, as it would from time to time, we can pick ourselves up and continue on, because we know that we are involved in something of significance. When we pursue that kind of life, we become more attuned to those joy-filled moments, when God's Spirit breaks through our questioning, our doubts, and our tiredness, and gives us reasons to sing and dance and celebrate, often when we least expect, as was the case with the bridesmaids.

This life that we live is not meant to be just a pathway to something else; it is meant to be valued, enjoyed, celebrated and shared for all that it is. And there is much joy and fulfilment when we do so.

"Daddy", the little boy asked, "Do we get trophies for playing baseball this spring?" the father answered: "No, but you get to go out and run around and have lots of fun while learning to play".

God invites us to go out and participate as fully as possible in life with God and with one another, to live lives of significance, not just success, and to have lots of fun while we learn to live as God would have us.

Thanks be to God.

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