

Mary Mitchell
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Matthew 25:1-13
“The Ones Who Were Left Out”

Good morning church! I’m really happy to have the opportunity to share a message with you today. Since this is my first time preaching for you, I thought I’d introduce myself, tell you a little bit about myself.

When I was in elementary school, my teachers complained to my mother that I was easily distracted, usually looking out the window, I couldn’t sit still and was sometimes disruptive in class, and I was having trouble completing my homework. So when I was in third grade, my mother took me in and had me tested for learning disabilities. I was given what is effectively an IQ test, and was told that I have an above average IQ, and there is no reason why I should be struggling in school. I’m just lazy and need to try harder. With no interventions, I struggled all the way through school.

I think this poem by Kathy Winters better explains my experience:
The Misunderstood Child A poem about children with hidden disabilities
by Kathy Winters

I am the child that looks healthy and fine. I was born with ten fingers and toes. But something is different, somewhere in my mind, And what it is, nobody knows.

I am the child that struggles in school, Though they say that I'm perfectly smart. They tell me I'm lazy -- can learn if I try -- But I don't seem to know where to start.

I am the child that won't wear the clothes Which hurt me or bother my feet. I dread sudden noises, can't handle most smells, And tastes -- there are few foods I'll eat.

I am the child that can't catch the ball And runs with an awkward gait. I am the one chosen last on the team And I cringe as I stand there and wait.

I am the child with whom no one will play -- The one that gets bullied and teased. I try to fit in and I want to be liked, But nothing I do seems to please.

I am the child that tantrums and freaks Over things that seem petty and trite. You'll never know how I panic inside, When I'm lost in my anger and fright.

I am the child that fidgets and squirms Though I'm told to sit still and be good. Do you think that I choose to be out of control? Don't you know that I would if I could?

I am the child with the broken heart Though I act like I don't really care. Perhaps there's a reason God made me this way -- Some

message he sent me to share.

For I am the child that needs to be loved And accepted and valued too. I
am the child that is misunderstood. I am different - but look just like you.

This is a big and important part of my identity because it shapes the way I work and interact in the world. It affects my relationships, and hinders my ability to make friends. What I didn't know until I was an adult is that I have ADHD. I was diagnosed late in life, which means I never got the support or accommodations I needed as a child, and I've been left to my own devices to figure out how to cope. Well, I'm not totally on my own, my spouse is my grown up, he helps me quite a bit. And with the advent of modern technology, I can program my phone to remind me to do all the stuff I'm supposed to do. But I still struggle with executive dysfunction, social cues, and I get overwhelmed easily. For example, I struggle to go to the grocery store, because big buildings with lots of people are difficult for me to navigate.

People with ADHD and autism spectrum disorder often struggle with social interaction. I often struggle with conversation, I often can't figure out how to initiate conversations or I lose the thread of the conversation. My social faux pas cause me to be excluded from social events. I have a hard time figuring out social norms, expectations, and facial expressions. I'm often accused of not having any common sense. There are unwritten rules to society that most seem to just know

intuitively, but people with ADHD and autism struggle to understand these mysterious rules that no one told us about.

Executive dysfunction means that I struggle to organize, prioritize and initiate tasks, staying on task, and completing tasks. For people with ADHD and autism spectrum disorder, figuring out what needs to be done is one challenge, then trying to prioritize tasks is another. It's a common misconception that people with ADHD procrastinate, but that's only true because we struggle to prioritize tasks, until they become immediately urgent. Another struggle is to organize the many steps required for a single task. For example, washing the dishes may seem like a single task to most people. But it's really many small tasks. First recognize that the dishes need to be done, go to the kitchen, approach the sink, turn on the water, put a little bit of dish soap in. Uh-oh, we've come to a stumbling block, how much is a little bit, that's an indeterminate amount. Is a little bit a drop, or a tablespoon? Some people may use too little, but others may use WAAAAY too much. Once you have a sink full of soapy water, you need the dish cloth. Uh-oh another stumbling block. You have to get the dish cloth out from wherever they're stored. People with executive dysfunction struggle to know ahead of time what tools they will need for a task, or getting the tools out before initiating the task.

So what does all that have to do with a parable of ten bridesmaids? Well, I don't know about you, but I don't like an image of the Kingdom of Heaven that

excludes half the people. Forewarning; I'm taking a bit of a different approach to interpreting scripture; a method which is used by Black, Liberationist and Womanist biblical interpreters, I'm going to talk back to the text, using my own personal experience. I don't think this parable is an explanation of the Kingdom of heaven, but it is an illustration of exclusion and division that exists in this world. I think we could rename this parable, "How Not To Be".

But I can't just rewrite scripture. So I first want to draw your attention to a couple of details. Many of Jesus' parables have a surprise ending or a plot twist. But this one tells us up front that there are five wise and five foolish bridesmaids, and the parable ends exactly where we would expect, the five wise ones are in, and the five foolish are put out. Where's the plot twist, where's the challenge, where's the subversion? Secondly, there's a detail that should seem odd, or out of place. The bridegroom was delayed, and we are told that it was midnight before he finally showed up! And the wise ones, who had brought extra oil, told the foolish ones to go buy oil. Now in the 21st century, there may be some stores open 24/7, but do you think in the 1st century the shops in the marketplace are open at midnight? Probably no. These details raise my suspicion. What's really going on here? One scholar suggests that the editor of this text, let's call him Matthew, conflated two different parables, and this is not the way Jesus originally told it. This parable speaks of alienation, rejection and harsh judgment. Why should invited party

guests get rejected and locked out? I suggest an alternate reading, an interpretation that attempts to recognize the differences between the two groups of women. I suggest we change the labels from wise and foolish to neurotypical and autistic. I think the five labeled as foolish actually struggle with social norms and executive dysfunction. You know how you get a party invitation that says the party starts at 7, but the host doesn't actually expect you to show up at 7 on the dot? Fashionably late is an indeterminate amount of time. I don't know how to deal with that situation, so I just get to the party at 7 and sit outside in my car until I see other party guests arriving. But I wouldn't expect to wait until midnight! Perhaps the five autistic bridesmaids didn't have the social awareness to know that the bridegroom would be running late. Somehow the wise ones knew that the groom's prior commitment could take all night. And maybe the so-called foolish bridesmaids struggle with executive dysfunction, didn't know they were expected to bring extra oil. They lack the ability to know ahead of time what they would need. They start out with a disadvantage, and by the time they caught up, it was too late. But did the women fail, or did their community fail them? It's the so-called wise ones that drive the division. They think themselves superior, they have read the social cues and had the mental function to plan ahead. Wisdom, in this parable, is characterized by selfishness. If they had cared for their friends, maybe they would have noticed right away that the other five didn't bring extra oil and they could

have advised them to get more oil before the groom came. Or they could have planned the event together and made sure everyone knew ahead of time to bring extra oil. Or they should have brought enough oil to share with everyone. Maybe they could have linked arms and went into the banquet together. It's the "wise" ones that want the others to fail, they want the "foolish" ones to be labeled as unacceptable. This competitive divisiveness and exclusion is not wisdom. Wisdom that leaves half the people locked out, is not wise in my book, it's selfish and ugly. That kind of wisdom is not discipleship when those that do not conform to societal norms are not welcome!

And I think maybe we are guilty of labeling people even today as foolish when really they just need a little help. How can the Kingdom of heaven be more inclusive? What's the good news? Responsible and redemptive discipleship. We bring people alongside, we help, we look after and care for those that don't have the capacity. First, don't judge. Don't assume a social faux pax was on purpose. Don't assume that a person chose to be late, or chose to have a meltdown. Don't assume everyone knows what's going on or knows the unwritten rules. Instead be clear. Make sure the invitation is clear; what time do you want me to be there, really. What should I bring with me? Don't assume everyone knows they should bring a dish. Be clear about where, don't have me knocking on the front door and wondering why no one is answering the door when the party is in the backyard.

Most people with ADHD and autism are great at following rules, as long as the rules are clear. Don't hold someone in contempt, or blame them when the rules are unclear. And for those that struggle to conform to our standards, maybe we change the standards to be more inclusive. Maybe we allow for hiding under the table or pew, or rocking in the corner. Maybe some people can cope better when they wear noise canceling headphones. Maybe we normalize fidget toys, or stuffies. Last thing I'll tell you about myself, this is my stuffie, Daniel Tiger from the popular TV show Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, and I carry Daniel Tiger in my backpack to help me when I feel overwhelmed. Or maybe some people need extra time to get caught up, like our autistic bridesmaids. They somehow procured oil, and came back, but were locked out. In the Kingdom of heaven, love and grace abound. No one gets locked out, and all are welcome. Not only are they invited, they are made to feel welcome. Being inclusive means including those that don't quite fit it and no one gets left out. Can I get an Amen.

For those that need a little extra time to process, we're going to pause for 30 seconds before we go on to the hymn.