

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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Matthew 25:1-13 (NRSV)

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. [2] Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. [3] When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; [4] but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. [5] As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. [6] But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' [7] Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps.

[8] The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' [9] But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.'

[10] And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.

[11] Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' [12] But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' [13] Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

BE PREPARED

Be prepared. That's the Boy Scout motto, and that's the essence of our lesson for today. Be prepared. Get ready.

That's a good motto, but I've always wondered, "How do you get ready when you don't know what's coming?" We certainly can't anticipate every problem or event in our life. Even the most conservative planners are sometimes caught unprepared.

There are some problems that we can fix with a checkbook or a helping hand from some friends and family. But, there are some things that are not fixed so easily.

Every week I counsel with someone who has had a tragically unexpected event occur in their lives. Someone is in trouble with the law. Someone is diagnosed with a deadly disease. An important relationship comes to an end. Someone loses a loved one.

The words are often the same. They say something like, "It was such a shock. It was so unexpected. I just wasn't prepared for this to happen."

Is there any way to prepare for that phone call in the middle of the night? Is there any way to prepare for the unexpected tragedy?

Some would say no. Some would say that we are often at the mercy of events that are beyond our control. We are frail human beings whose lives can easily be shattered in a number of ways.

In a sense they are right. We are mortal, and sometimes we are helpless in the face of life's big moments.

THE BEST IS YET TO COME

But, as Christians we would say there is a hope that reaches beyond the tragedies of life. One of my members went to a church conference for seniors. It was all about heaven, and the title of that conference was "The best is yet to come."

This is what we believe as disciples of Jesus. We believe that we have hope for more than this life. We have hope for life beyond this life. We prepare not just for what is coming into our life today. We also prepare for eternity.

I would contend that preparing for eternity is the most important thing that we do in life. If we really believe what we say we believe, if we really believe that in life and in death we belong to God, how does that affect our preparation for the future? How might our priorities change if we had an eternal perspective?

That's what our lesson for today is all about. It's a parable about how we should prepare for the eternal kingdom that comes. Once again Jesus gets at this heavenly lesson with an earthly story. He tells a parable.

THE PARABLE

Ten bridesmaids were waiting for the groom to come and call them to the wedding party. Five were wise and five were foolish. Five prepared ahead of time by having extra oil for their lamps, and five didn't.

At midnight they hear the alarm. The bridegroom is coming. The ten bridesmaids awaken and trim their lamps. The five who didn't prepare ask the five who did to share their oil. But, there is not enough to go around.

So the foolish bridesmaids must seek to buy some extra oil in the middle of the night. Good luck with that! And while the foolish bridesmaids are gone, the bridegroom comes. Those who were ready went with him. The others were left behind.

Later the foolish bridesmaids make it to the house where the wedding party is taking place. But, they are not allowed to come in and join the festivities. They cry out, "Lord, lord, open to us." And the bridegroom replies, "I do not know you."

When it comes to a wedding party, the word of the bridegroom is final. The bridesmaids missed out on the party because they weren't prepared.

DETAILS EXPLAINED

Now the details of this story seem a little odd to us because they describe the wedding customs of another culture. In Palestine a wedding called for a truly huge celebration. Parties were that rare opportunity to relax in the ancient world. Everyone turned out to accompany the couple to their new home.

The caravan went by the longest possible route so that everyone could wish the couple well as they embarked on this new phase of their life. A wedding was truly an event that was celebrated by the whole community.

There was Jewish saying which went, "Everyone from six to sixty will follow the marriage drum." Some of the rabbis even suggested that the study of the law could be abandoned in favor of participating in the marriage feast.

The customs in the Middle East are similar even today. One commentator told of encountering ten maidens playing a musical instrument as he entered a Galilean town. The driver of his cab told him as these young ladies danced in from of their car that these were bridesmaids keeping the bride company until the bridegroom arrived.

When asked if it might be possible to see the wedding, the driver replied with a shrug, "Who knows? It might be tonight. It might be tomorrow. It might be the night after that. Nobody knows for certain."

He went on to explain that one of the great things to do at a wedding was to catch the bridal party napping. It was quite common for the bridegroom to come unexpectedly in the middle of the night with a man shouting in front of him saying, "Behold, the bridegroom is coming."

LIFE ON TIPTOE

So, if you want to attend this party, you have to be ready at all times. You have to be prepared.

Jesus said that it is the same with the kingdom of God. You don't know when the decisive day will come so you have to live your whole life with a certain sense of expectation. We need to live our whole life with the title of that church conference in mind. "The best is yet to come."

But, I have found that we don't live our lives this way. We can only stand on tiptoe so long, and then we grow weary.

Instead of thinking about and preparing for the really important things in life our world becomes filled with a thousand details. We prepare for the meals that we will eat. We prepare for the holidays. We prepare for a future career. We prepare for what we've got to do next week at work.

And yet we don't prepare for the kingdom of God. Spiritual matters take a back seat to everything else.

Alvin Toffler wrote a book about the future that was popular when I was in college. It was called Future Shock and some of the things that he predicted have come true. For example, he suggested that in the future we would face the "peril of over choice."

We do face that peril. Our lives are filled with so many choices that we have a hard time figuring out what is really important. Anthony Robinson in an article entitled "Choices that Matter" wrote,

"I wonder if somewhere old Screwtape, C.S. Lewis's devil, is rubbing his hands together and gleefully saying; 'Now this is an achievement. They're busy all the time making choices that don't matter. We've got them now. They're terminally distracted.'"

Does that describe you? Are you busy all the time making choices which don't really matter? Are you terminally distracted?

Take it from one who has officiated at many funerals. In an instant the things that we think are important will be relegated to the dustbin of history, and the kingdom that comes will be the only thing that matters.

Let me suggest that living our lives on tiptoe, living our lives with an eye toward the kingdom that comes is not as impossible as it may at first seem. We will always have to prepare for the ordinary things of life. We will always have to cook supper, pick up the kids from band practice and figure out how to pay our bills.

But, I would say that it is possible to prepare for the ordinary with an eye on the extraordinary. I would say that it is possible to live with one foot in this world and one foot in the kingdom that comes. I would say that it is possible to see our present life through the lens of eternity.

THE POWER OF CHOICE

Some might think that this is a discouraging way to live. I would say that the opposite is true. If we believe that the best is yet to come then the lens of eternity lets me see just how minor most problems really are in the grand scheme of things. People say "don't sweat the small stuff" and in the face of eternity most stuff is very small stuff indeed.

Joshua told the children of Israel “Choose this day whom you will serve.” And today’s gospel lesson brings us that same clarion call to discipleship. Wake up! Now is the time to decide.

When Jesus talks about young women who are not prepared for the coming of the bridegroom, he is really talking about us. Spiritual preparation cannot wait until tomorrow. Today is the day that we must begin our walk toward eternity.

The word decision comes from a Latin word which means to cut. To decide is to cut off certain possibilities while embracing others. Perhaps we don’t want to decide because we want to keep our options open. But, the idea of keeping our options open is an illusion.

Choices don’t last forever. Every day doors close and doors open, but nothing stays the same.

Jesus tells us to make those choices in light of eternity. The kingdom comes, and we need to be ready.

Someone once told me about a college roommate who was meticulous in his preparation for study. He purchased a large comfortable chair, slippers and a soft robe.

He fastened a book rest to the arm of the chair to hold the book at just the right angle. He even installed a special lamp and eyeshade. Pencils and paper lay on top of his custom bookcase.

Each evening the roommate would come into his room after the evening meal, put on his robe, take off his shoes and slip into the slippers, adjust the study lamp, put the book on the book rest, recline in his comfortable chair with the eyeshade over his eyes ... and when everything was perfectly adjusted, he would fall fast asleep.

Isn’t this a parable of how we often live our lives? We spend all our time getting comfortable, but lose sight of what is really important.

RICH TOWARD GOD

I’m reminded of another story that Jesus told about a successful farmer who had a bumper crop and made plans to build bigger barns to hold his new found wealth. But, that night God came to him and said, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”

Jesus concluded that parable by saying, “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”

How do we do that? How can we become rich toward God? How can we prepare for the kingdom that comes? The Bible is very clear about this. We become rich toward God by loving our neighbor. We prepare for the future by serving our brother and sister today.

Some commentators suggest that the oil needed to burn our lamps is the oil of good works. And that is consistent with the biblical message. You'll remember that Jesus told his disciples,

"... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:16 (NRSV)

Don't misunderstand. Good works won't save you. The Bible teaches us that salvation is only by faith through grace.

But, as James put it faith without works is dead. Good works light the way to the future. Good works prepare us for the kingdom that comes.

Good works are the oil that keeps our lamps burning and our minds focused on the kingdom that comes.

MOTIVATED BY LOVE

Now some might think that this would be a difficult way to live. For many being prepared means living every moment at a fevered pitch, worried about what we should be doing just in case the kingdom comes today or tomorrow. The coming kingdom is a threat.

There certainly is an element of threat in today's lesson. But, to read this text as threat alone is to miss an important point. The coming kingdom is also a promise as well, and I think that the promise is a better motivation to do God's will than the threat.

In the Bible the kingdom of God is often described as the party to end all parties. The book of Revelation describes the wedding feast of the Lamb when people from the East and the West, the North and the South to sit at God's gracious table.

Now how do we prepare for a wedding? There's a lot to be done. There are dresses to buy, dinners to plan and so forth.

But, the most important preparation is done by the bride and groom. They prepare for a life together by loving each other and trying to deepen their relationship.

In a wedding the relationship is the most important thing. Everything else, the ring, the clothes, the decorations, the reception ... all of those things are secondary. All of those

things are just ways to symbolize what should be at the center of the wedding, the relationship, the love and commitment of a man and a woman.

In fact, for those who are in love, even the snags that are an inevitable part of every wedding become something to remember and cherish. Everything, good and bad is reinterpreted in light of their great love for each other.

I think that there is a parallel between preparing for a wedding and preparing for the coming of God's kingdom. It is not a preparation born out of fear, thinking that God is ready to lower the boom on us if we don't do this or that perfectly.

It is a preparation born out of love.

God in Christ tells us that our sins are forgiven, that he loved us first while we were still sinners. That kind of love draws us into a personal relationship.

And that's how we prepare for the kingdom that comes. We prepare by cultivating a relationship with our Lord. We prepare by thinking about God's promises, doing God's will, and forgiving others as God has forgiven us. In the light of God's love preparation is not a hardship but a joyful privilege.

That's what motivated the five wise bridesmaids to prepare, and that's what should motivate us to prepare as well.

Today is the day to get ready for the big party. Our lamps need to be trimmed with the oil of forgiveness and faith.

You never know when the bridegroom will arrive. You never know when God's kingdom will come.

And believe me. This is one party that we don't want to miss!

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN](#)