

**“Get Ready to Wait”**  
**Matthew 25:1-13**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Greenlawn**  
**The Rev. Frederick Woodward      November 6, 2011**

**Matthew 25:1-13 (NIV)**

*At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.*

*At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’*

*Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’*

*‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’*

*But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.*

*Later, the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir! They said. ‘Open the door for us!’*

*But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’*

*Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.’*

**Get Ready to Wait**

A man was leaving the DMV as I was arriving. With the shake of his head and a look of disgust, he said those words we all hate to hear, “Get ready to wait.” But he didn’t really need to warn me. I had brought something along to read and so settled in for the long haul. This time, at least, I was ready to wait.

We hear about another long wait in our scripture lesson for this morning. In the parable known as the “Ten Virgins,” a group of young maidens- think of them as bridesmaids- await the bridegroom whose arrival signaled the start of what in those days would have been a week-long wedding celebration. The bridesmaids have a very special role to play: they are to lead the procession with lamps or torches. But there is an unexplained delay, not of the bride as we might expect, but of the groom. Remarkably, in this parable about a wedding celebration, the bride is never mentioned at all.

Welcome again, to the strange and wonderful land of parable! But here again is a parable with some fairly obvious allegorical features. The bridegroom is a clear stand in for our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> The delay of the bridegroom represents the delay of Jesus Christ to return to judge the world with justice and mercy. That delay, a key theme in Matthew’s Gospel,<sup>2</sup> had evidently created a crisis for Matthew’s faith community, which is here represented by the maidens or bridesmaids.

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus self-identifies himself as the bridegroom at Matt. 9:15 and in the parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matt. 22:1-10).

<sup>2</sup> Concern for Jesus’ delay is evident at Matt. 21:33; 24:3ff. 24:36-44; 24:45-51; 25:5; 25:14; and 25:31-46.

In its original setting, the parable thus functioned both to encourage and warn members of Matthew's church about how they were to live in the in-between times. But that encouragement and warning is not only them, of course, but also for us.

Some of the bridesmaids, like some in Matthew's faith community, were ready for the long haul; they carried along flasks of oil to refill their lamps. But others were unprepared, and so when the bridegroom's return was finally announced, they discover that their lamps had begun to sputter out. Their first instinct was to try to borrow oil from the wise maidens, but there was simply not enough oil to go around. And so the foolish maidens went out to purchase more oil, but in the process, they missed the bridegroom's arrival.

This in turn leads to a judgment scene in which the foolish maidens beg to be let in to join the marriage feast. "Sir, sir," they cry. "Open the door for us." But the bridegroom refuses, and utters some of the most chilling words of all Scripture: "I don't know you."

The maidens' words, "Sir, sir," and the bridegroom's response, "I don't know you", set up an intentional echo in Matthew's Gospel that may help us to apply this parable more concretely to our own lives. Remember that the words, "sir, sir" translate the Greek words, *kurie, kurie*, words that can be translated "Lord, Lord." To see why that is important, remember that in the seventh chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus exhorted his disciples to be fruitful with these words, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord,' (but)... I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you...'" (Matt. 7:11-13).

To be on the other side of the door at that last judgment is the worse news around, but what gives this parable particular bite, I think, is that the judgment in question is not against outsiders but insiders, members of Matthew's own community who were failing to practice disciplines of readiness as they awaited the return of their Savior. And that judgment extends, of course, also to us.

The parable is not without good news, but its good news is not that any of us can know the precise day or hour of Jesus' return. The wise maidens didn't know the hour of the bridegroom's return any more than did the foolish ones. And the good news is not that the wise maidens alone knew the identity of the bridegroom, for even the foolish maidens recognized the bridegroom as Lord, though that recognition did them little good. The good news, I think, is that our triune God graciously gives us disciplines or habits of readiness, as represented in our parable by the reserves of oil that the wise maidens brought along with them, but which the foolish maidens left at home.

So what might it look like to practice disciplines of readiness in our own time when Jesus' return is more, not less overdue? How might we live in the confidence that Christ's return is indeed imminent, but without turning ourselves into a bundle of nerves? Here too, the wise maidens have something to teach us. They did not try to exert themselves in superhuman ways. When they grew tired, they got some sleep, just as the foolish maidens did, and they were not in any way condemned for that. For what distinguished the wise and foolish maidens was not that some nodded off and the others did not, but that only the wise ones brought along extra oil. The wise ones got ready to wait by practicing disciplines of readiness.

So what I would like to ask briefly this morning is, what might it mean for those of us who still await the *parousia* or second coming of Jesus to bring along extra oil? What might it mean for a community such as ours to practice disciplines of readiness?

The first thing to acknowledge, I think, is that the delay of Jesus' return is no easier for Christians today than it was for first century Christians; it is even more difficult since nearly two millennia have now passed since our NT documents first announced Jesus' imminent return. Sustaining belief in Jesus' second coming after the passage of not decades, but centuries, continues to drive many well-meaning Christians, well, a little nuts. I have in mind not only the Left Behind folks who dream dreams not of beloved community or the peaceable kingdom, but of world devastation. I think of poor Harold Camping, whose end-of-the-world predictions have disappointed Family Radio listeners since 1993, recently in April, but still more recently, on October 21<sup>st</sup>. But countless other Christians continue to prognosticate regarding the end of the world despite our Bible's explicit warnings against doing so. As each new natural disaster, climatic change ("weird weather") and Mid-East political development sets people's apocalyptic teeth chattering, out come the calculators. And out comes the Bible, which many use for divination, like a Ouija board, rather than for Christian formation, the shaping of Christian character after the image of Jesus Christ.

So for disciples who believe in Jesus Christ and who trust in his return, but who do not pretend to know the day or the hour, what would disciplines of readiness look like? Well, let's talk first about what they don't look like. Practicing disciplines of readiness does not mean watching the clock like a bunch of bored teenagers. It does not mean whooping ourselves up into a frenzied state of hyper-vigilance. And it does not mean hoarding up our private spiritual blessing.

The wise maidens, it is true, did not share their extra oil with the foolish ones, but we are not meant to universalize their unwillingness into a teaching that legitimizes spiritual selfishness. What is at stake here is that we simply cannot transfer our spiritual resources, reserves or practices to others any more than they could do so for us. Although Christian life can only be shaped in community, each of us must be individually responsible and accountable for our spiritual standing before God.

So what might the practice of disciplines of readiness look like for individuals and communities? It would probably mean developing the spiritual resources that God has given us to sustain our faith, hope and love. It would mean expressing the love and compassion of God in concrete ways, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger in our midst, and caring for the least among us. It would mean letting our light shine before others that they might see our good works and join us in our praise of our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16). It would mean sharing the Gospel. It would mean walking the talk.

Such good works are not intended to earn or assure our salvation, of course, but simply to give expression to it. Our good works are ways of making manifest the presence of the kingdom in an era when many have given up waiting altogether, when many have come to believe that what we see is what we get. Our good works are intended to glorify our Father in heaven, and we do that as we increasingly make manifest the righteousness of the Torah which Jesus perfectly summed up in the twin commandments to love our God with all our hearts, souls and minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Our parable this morning may teach us another lesson as well, and that is that there is never quite enough of today's oil to light up tomorrow's darkness. Our past spiritual experiences are like manna; they cannot be stored up without somehow spoiling. Even our most cherished conversion stories, however inspiring, grow stale if they are not narrated anew in the present tense. For whenever our good news slips into the past tense, it ceases to be good news at all. It needs to be refreshed and replenished, like an oil lamp.

When I was a young person growing up in this church, I made repeated altar calls at the Youth for Christ rallies and other revival meetings that we attended with Pastor Bob Duncan. After I grew up, I wondered why once never seemed enough for me. Perhaps it was because the challenges and temptations of youth did not end for me once I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. Perhaps it was because my life did not take on a "happily ever after" or fairy tale quality which, of course, is not what the Christian life was ever intended to be about. Perhaps I made repeated altar calls because I gave disproportionate emphasis to my decision for Christ, rather than to God's decision for me in claiming me- and all of us- in the waters of baptism. Perhaps I failed to understand that justification without sanctification is a sure recipe for sputtering out.

Justification and sanctification, though closely related, are not the same. Through justification, our sins are pardoned, and we are accepted and accounted as persons righteous in God's sight, not for anything we did, but through the grace of God.<sup>3</sup> Though justification is the beginning of the Christian journey, the Christian journey does not end there. The Christian journey involves not only justification, but also sanctification.

Sanctification flows from our recognition that we have made right with God (justification). "Sanctification is the work of God's free grace whereby we are renewed... after the image of God, and enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness."<sup>4</sup> (7.035). In sanctification, the Holy Spirit accomplishes God's purpose in us by issuing forth in lives of self-rendering love, lives set apart for service, and making us responsible and response-able within the community of faith. Sanctification is about how the Spirit helps us to become more and more real as Christians.

But while sanctification as an ongoing work of the Holy Spirit that flows out of justification, it happens neither inevitably nor automatically. It is a continuing gift to which we need to give our continuing consent. Sanctification is a lamp that needs daily filling. It is both gift and task.

Our parable this morning both encourages and warns us. In its concern not only with justification, but also with sanctification, our parable helps us to understand that it is not enough for us to receive the lamp of salvation; we need also to live fully into our salvation, and that means keeping our lamps, by God's grace, full, trimmed, and lit. We do that not simply by reciting the Sinner's Prayer, and inviting Jesus to become our Savior and Lord. We do it through the practices and disciplines of readiness, loving our

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<sup>3</sup> "Q. 70. "What is Justification? A. Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sin, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; no for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them and received by faith alone." (The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church; Part I, *Book of Confessions: The Larger Catechism*, 7.180).

<sup>4</sup> The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church; Part I, *Book of Confessions: The Shorter Catechism*, 7.035.

God with all our heart, soul and mind, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Through these and other disciplines of readiness, the Spirit sustains our faith, hope and love. In getting ready in this sense to wait, we join the wedding procession for our Savior who has come into the world to lighten our world's darkness.

So get ready to wait. Practice disciplines of readiness, and let your line shine brightly before you.

Halleluiah and amen.