

November 12, 2017
Matthew 25:1-13
Prudent Discipleship
Michael Stanfield

“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. *The words of God for the people of God. Let us pray: open our hearts, our minds our souls to the fresh movement of your spirit as we consider these ancient words you have preserved for us Oh Lord, amen.*

I can remember the first time I ever preached from this text. I was a pastor in Alabama and I always took Mondays off. So sometimes on Sunday evenings I would channel surf after Janet and the kids had gone to bed. I happened upon the very end of a taped worship service from that morning. As the worship service faded, there was a shot of the pastor in his study.

He said, “Thank-you for joining us for worship. My text for next week will be Matthew 25:1-13. My sermon topic will be ‘Fools’ and I hope a good many will attend.”

My topic this morning is not on “fools” nor is it necessarily my hope that some are attending this morning; but it *is* on the parable of what is commonly known as “The wise and foolish maidens.”

The backdrop for this parable is a wedding. It might be helpful to know that an engagement in antiquity was as binding as the marriage itself. It was really the first stage of marriage, and it took divorce proceedings to dissolve even it.

It is interesting to note that remnants of this practice remained even in the West all the way up until the 19th century. Engagement was considered a serious step by Protestants and Catholics alike. In fact, the Book of Church Services for Protestants from 1850 includes a separate service for formal engagement. It is called a *Declaration of Intent to Marry*. This service was usually held at the church with the families of the bride and groom in attendance, along with church elders or deacons as witnesses.

But as the official authority of Christianity waned in the West, engagement became less and less formal. The *Service for the Declaration of Intent* was enfolded into the Wedding Service itself and has become a kind of solemn oath given by the bride and groom that they are clear about what they are getting into – a covenant ordained by God going all the way back to Adam and Eve – one that is not dependent upon and therefore focused on the them, specifically, or on the romantic love they

have for each other, but on their faith in Christ that is at the center of God's purpose for humanity and that they thus vow will be at the center of their marriage.

So after the minister gives a short dissertation on the divine purpose of marriage, the bride and groom are each asked to respond positively to the following question:

Having heard how God has created, ordered, and blessed the covenant of marriage, do you affirm your desire and intention to enter into this covenant?

Yes, marriage in the Church traditionally has always been serious considered serious business; but it was considered even more so in antiquity. Back then at the end of the formal betrothal period, the marriage took place:

- on a Wednesday if the bride was a virgin and
- on a Thursday if she was a widow.

The bridegroom and his party then made their way to the home of the bride.... When the two groups came together, the wedding took place. After this, there was a procession, generally to the home of the bridegroom. There, feasting began that might go on for days. The processions often took place at night, when torches made for a spectacular display.

Clearly something like this is presupposed in Jesus' parable of the bridesmaids. The ten young women were involved in going out to meet the bridegroom; it would appear then that they probably belonged to the *bride's* party. Upon the grooms arrival they would have been expected to take their place in the procession to the bridegroom's home as official bearers of the light on their way to the feast.

And as the parable indicates, the women fell into two groups, five in each; half were sensible and caring enough that they had their torches oiled and ready; the other five were foolish, in that they took no oil with them. It was necessary to pour oil on the rags at the end of the torches to get them to burn brightly, but five of the girls had waited too long to attain the necessary oil believing they had plenty of time.

The point of the parable is that loving, caring, and faithfulness are connected to being prepared – being alert – mindful of what is needed in the moment, and ready.

The bridesmaids represent us – Jesus' disciples.

The bridegroom is Jesus, the Spirit of God, anytime, *anytime* that Spirit decides to come with power on any individual or group.

As I indicated earlier, this parable is better known as that of “the wise and foolish maidens.”

The New Testament Greek word for wise is “phronimos.” And really, a better English translation of this word phronimos is “prudence”. In the gospel narrative, ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were phronimos or prudent and five of them were imprudent.

According to the Webster's online dictionary, to be "prudent" means to be skillful in practical affairs, or to exercise good judgment or common sense when it comes to dealing with people; to be prepared for multiple future outcomes especially when there are others involved.

The Ten bridesmaids, from the outset, look alike. What makes five prudent and the other five imprudent is their care for the future needs of others by their attention to detail.

Clearly by implication, it is something that is attainable by all who are called. And in Matthew, to live in this wise, ready way that tends to practical needs is to live for the Kingdom, to live for God, to live for the day the Bridegroom will return. And so this kind of readiness opens us to all kinds of opportunities for meeting God in deep and profound ways. But it is also very demanding.

It is easy get ready to be a peacemaker for a day. But being ready day after day in the midst of a political and cultural landscape that appears to encourage a lack of civility if not outright bullying, while the bridegroom is delayed, can easily cause us to feel demoralized and hopeless.

Getting ourselves ready to be merciful for an evening can be pleasant; I can pat myself on the back and say what a good boy am I. But being merciful when everything you value is under siege, and the bridegroom is delayed, and God seems far off, requires significant sacrifice.

Yet this parable of Jesus teaches us that to be prepared is to be wise; to be caught short is to be other-wise and it is to risk missing out on the greatest gift God has to offer – the divine wedding – union with God.

So I ask you, "Are you ready? Are you prepared for a new meeting of Christ that can come any moment? If not, like the five foolish maids, you might actually lose what you assume is already yours."

When I was 12 years old, I had a best friend whose name was Jamie. We were very close – so close that a hard lesson learned by one of us was also a hard lesson learned by the other. One day we both learned a lesson in alertness when we came home from school one afternoon and found that his pet guinea pigs were missing. Jamie rushed to ask his mother about them.

She said very matter of factly, "I gave them away because you didn't take care of them."

"But I did take care of them!" Jamie protested.

"Jamie," his mother said, "I gave them away two weeks ago!"

Are we involved in readiness? Are we paying attention to the important details that align with our values or are we just coasting along – allowing ourselves to grow forlorn, hopeless and weary at yet another report of a mass shooting?

Are we thinking about specific ways that our compassion, our knowledge, our gifts may serve Christ amidst the failing institutions of our time, in the communities in which we serve, or are we just happy the doors of the church are open on Sunday Mornings as a kind of sanctuary against a world that often feels as if it is coming apart?

Jesus tells us we need to be ready to move when *he* is on the move. And that may look different from our usual planning and programming as a church.

James Cobble, Jr. is the Founder and Executive Director of Christian Ministry Resources. He is the author or co-author of 20 books – riveting page turners like “Reducing the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse in Your Church,” and “Risk Management Handbook for Churches and Schools.” Across all denominations, Cobble is known as an expert by church judicatories in managing the Church as an institution and has led training events for church secretaries in over 120 cities.

Now I happen to believe that really good church secretaries are among the wise maidens in Jesus’ parables; but I also believe that folks like James Cobble have little to do with that. Good church secretaries just have this sixth sense about what is coming and what is needed; who will be pleased and who won’t; and they help ministers and elders prepare accordingly. Their plans are grounded in their faith and in their experience in the church on the ground – not in some grand theory about planning.

Contrast that to Cobble, who, in an attempt to emphasize the importance of planning, frequently tells of a ‘well-known Christian leader’ who was once asked, ‘If you had only four years left to live, what would you do?’ His response, which, I kid you not, is lifted up by Cobble as the example to be followed is: ‘I would spend the first year planning what I would do in the remaining three.’

Well, I don’t know about you, but that kind of response leaves me flat. I don’t believe that kind of person is preparing for the kind of future I want to live in – programmed and planned down to the last minute. To me, that response illustrates less the *importance* of planning, than the *futility* of it – especially when one’s soul is really not prepared to receive what may be available right now in the very next moment.

If you don’t already know this about me, let me be clear: I am a planner. I appreciate organized people who think ahead and are prepared. But there is a difference between being wisely cautious, lovingly deliberate, a gracious prepared host, if you will, and planning as an idol that is worshipped. When planning becomes an idol, we believe deep down that what we plan can ensure some sort of perfect outcome.

The problem with this is that when the unforeseen happens – which it inevitably does, we get discouraged and we tend to lay blame: it should have planned better or the plan should have been followed better.

But we need to remember what the scriptures tell us about the Holy Spirit: it often comes upon our lives like a violent wind. I don’t know about you but that is not the most comforting of images. Janet is from Huntsville, Alabama and three years after we were married, a devastating tornado leveled her home church building, the building in which we were married, along with the surrounding neighborhoods. So when I hear “violent wind” that is the image that comes to my mind.

The point is, we never know, except in hindsight, whether the source of our suffering is God or *something* or *someone* else. And in the long run what does it matter? Being prepared means that, instead of looking for who or what to blame, or making excuses for our own lack of attention, we

should assume that God is present – or will be shortly. Because, bidden or unbidden, God will come. We therefore had best be ready, because sooner or later, for every one of us, those winds do blow.

Whether it is a political climate that appears to threaten the very fabric of democracy, or potential sufferings and losses of every conceivable kind, we had best be ready.

I used to keep a favorite Calvin and Hobbs cartoon taped to the back of my office door. Calvin comes marching up to his mother seated in a living room chair, having her morning cup of coffee. Calvin's head is encased in a large space helmet while a cape drapes across his shoulder down to the floor.

“What's up today?” asks his mom.

“Nothing so far,” He says.

“So far?” she questions.

“Well, you never know, something could happen today.” He strides off saying, “And if anything does, by golly, I'm going to be ready for it!”

His mom looks pensive in the last frame as she says, “I need a suit like that.”

We *can* have a suit like that. And that suit is connectivity to God –whether that be time spent in meditation, time spent studying the scriptures, time spent in prayer, time spent in compassionately reaching out to those in need, those who are victims of injustice or those with whom may vehemently disagree with you.

I understand prudence as the cultivation of a mindful attitude that keeps us and the people we serve open and ready throughout the days, and weeks, and months – to the ways the bridegroom may be coming to us; being aware of new or forgotten communities and planning in creative ways to connect with the people that are all around us; taking inventory and advantage of our abundant resources and how God might be calling us to use them.

You know, in most traditional Eastern Cultures, meditation is not considered to be a religious activity in the same way we Westerners think about it. It is simply thought of as good mental and emotional hygiene – a way of preparing the heart for what may come that day. It is a form of prayer – listening rather than talking – a form of prayer that allows one the ability to stand with hopeful, loving presence in the midst of despair, in the midst of of rancor, in the midst of discord. That's the wisdom of the five maidens with oil in their lamps.

So I gotta ask: How's your oil level?

Let us pray. Gracious Lord, we confess that like the foolish maidens of the parable we allow the routines of life to lull us into a dull sluggishness. In the silence that follows, help us to contemplate ways that we might keep alert and ready for your unexpected return.

Oh Lord, a big part of that preparation is making the resources you give us available for use. And so we now rededicate our lives and these offerings to you. In so doing, help us to be able to sleep when the blows. Amen.