



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMON

“Keep Awake”

Scripture Lessons: *Matthew 25: 1-13*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr.
on November 12, 2023, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 25: 1-13

The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

25 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten young women 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 young women 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 young women^[d] 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.

Keep Awake

Over a break during my senior year at Clemson, I came home and went fishing with a good friend of mine, Peter Demetre ... we went over to Waterfront Park ... just up East Bay Street. It wasn’t long before a young man, slightly older than I was at the time, came up and handed me a circle – it was made out of some kind of heavy card stock, and across the circle were written the words “round to-it.”

He said to me, “You know, many people don’t put trust in Jesus Christ because they never get around to it ... and now you have one.”

Of course, I had affirmed God’s love for me and my love for God long before that moment in time, but I must have been interested and hospitable enough, because, barely five minutes after he left – In personal professional assessment of church’s current needs, concluded improved communications is a priority as well as agreement on vision and mission, development of marketing plan, branding, and church positioning in community. Well, here came the big gun – the pastor!

Now, different from his protégé who had an easy way about him and was dressed casually ... this fellow was a bit older and looked a bit more serious. He was in a suit and had a kind of classic pastor look about him. I mean, I knew exactly who he was and what was about to happen from the moment he approached me. He cut right to the chase. “Do you know where you would be if you died tonight?” “Yes,” I responded, “I am a Christian.” But do you know where you would be if you died tonight?” “Yes, heaven.” I went on to say, “I’m starting seminary in the fall.” “But do you really know where you would be if you died tonight?”

I paused and gave him the kind of quizzical look that, I have no doubt, revealed both my disbelief, and, quite frankly, my disregard. We made some conversational amends and eventually he moved on to someone else.

But for a moment, as I stood there with my finger barely touching my fishing line ... didn’t want to miss a nibble ... my thoughts were not on fishing at all. I wasn’t doubting my faith, but I was a little upset. I mean, who was he to doubt the certainty of my faith?

That experience came to my mind again as I was preparing this morning’s sermon. I looked back in Bibles that I keep, and I can’t find any reference to having ever preached this text before, which is a little bit surprising because this story – this parable – shows up every three years in the Lectionary. It does so again today. I suppose I’m not so surprised, because this story makes me very uncomfortable and maybe it makes you uncomfortable.

The bridesmaids are part of the wedding party. They are not strangers. These are bridesmaids. They know the groom. They have the bouquet ... the dress!

Indeed, after the bride and groom are united by the rabbi under the huppah (the wedding canopy) ... after the service, the bridesmaids would naturally be a part of the picture. Years later and when someone opens that Shutterfly book, we would expect to see them!

This is what makes the parable more than a little unnerving, because these bridesmaids are part of the community ... they are in the pews on Sunday mornings ... they are the ones who tithe ... they are those soon-to-be seminarians, fishing on a pier.

They are part of the wedding, and they are preparing for it. In fact, it’s their job to greet the groom when he comes, and should his arrival come late, they had these little lamps ... they could have been torches ... either way they were fueled by oil.

That would not have been an uncommon sight to see the streets illuminated by the wedding party as they accompanied the groom to his home. But in the story Jesus tells, of the 10 bridesmaids, only five

of them got to the house in a timely fashion.

These days are wrought with conversations about time ... about God's time; specifically, about that time when the groom shall return.

After 14 years of studying the Bible, William Miller became convinced that Jesus would return in 1843. When Miller announced April 3 as the day, some of his disciples went to mountaintops, hoping for a head start to heaven. Others were in graveyards, planning to ascend in reunion with their departed loved ones.

When April 4 dawned as usual, the "Millerites" were disillusioned; but they took heart, because William Miller had predicted a range of dates for Christ's return. They still had until March 21 of the next year. The devout continued to make ready, but again they were disappointed. A third date, October 22, 1884, was set, but it also passed by relatively uneventful (*Today in the Word*, December 20, 1991).

William Miller is not alone in that kind of prophecy. In fact, in every generation there have been people who have claimed to know exactly when Christ would return, and all of them, without exception, have been wrong. Even now, we look upon the world and how Israel has come under attack ... and given how the Bible demonstrates a divine solidarity between God and his Old Testament covenant people (the Jews) it's no wonder our spiritual antenna goes up.

We wonder, what does all this mean? People and pastors naturally gravitate to passages like Ezekiel chapters 38 and 39 that speak of God's consummation, the fulfilment of all that God began at the dawn of time. But even Ezekiel's words are not so prescriptive that we know the date and time. For example, Ezekiel's prophecies speak of an attack from the north and Israel standing alone. What I'm saying is not everything fits so easily into a box labeled, "This is when Jesus will return" ... and it is not supposed to!!!

The Bible could not be more clear in terms of how surprising, how completely shocking, the timing of Jesus' return will be. Matthew's Gospel tells us that the coming of Jesus will be like the days of Noah. During that time Noah was dutifully going about building his ark, all-the-while the world kept right on going ... people went about their business of eating and drinking – "marrying and giving in marriage" – the Bible says, but no one knew anything was wrong, until the floodwaters came.

All this to say, while Jesus is undoubtedly coming back ... Jesus does not expect us to know exactly when it will happen, when, exactly, he will return; but Jesus does expect us to be ready!

In today's parable, it is not merely about timing. It is not just about failing to plan ahead and running out of oil. Something is fundamentally wrong!

In another story that Matthew tells, just three chapters earlier, there is a wedding guest ... someone who was on the list, and, in this case, unlike the bridesmaids, this man actually made it inside. He actually showed up. He didn't get the invitation and push it to the side of his desk and say, "I have better things to do." No! He came to the wedding! He understood that it was important to say "yes" to the king.

Listen to how Matthew describes it: "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

Tell me, was this story really about a wedding gown? Is this God's way of enforcing a violation of a dress code? Does this sound like the one who said, "Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or about your body. What you will wear? Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

No! The problem was not in what the man was wearing ... it's not that he showed up in shorts. He showed up short on righteousness, and he thought no one would notice, least of all the king. Ah, but the king saw past his façade. The man had come to the wedding alright, but the essence of his life stood out for all of the wrong reasons.

In other words, it is not what was happening on the outside. No! The king could see the man's heart, and he knew that, at a deep and spiritual level, the invitation had not been taken seriously.

I wonder if the same principle applies to our bridesmaids. They were there, they had the dress, they had the lamps, they had some oil. But is this parable about that stuff?

When the bridesmaids do finally arrive at the groom's home, they call out, "Lord, Lord. Open to us." But listen to what the groom said in response: "Truly I tell you; I do not know you."

These words give us reason to pause. We remember those other words of Jesus. "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven."

We are left to wonder, did these bridesmaids ever really know the groom? Or were they there because they had been told to be there? Being a part of a wedding was special. Why not? We get the very real sense that their relationship was superficial at best ... these were not soulmates, but rather acquaintances.

I am reminded of a story that Will Willimon shared some years ago. "He was serving a little church in

rural Georgia and one of the members had a relative who died. Willimon and his wife, Patsy, went to the funeral as a show of support for the family.

The funeral was in a little, hot, crowded, off-brand Baptist country church. Willimon said, “I had never seen anything like it. They wheeled the coffin in; the preacher began to preach. He shouted, fumed, flayed his arms. “It’s too late for Joe,” he screamed. “He might have wanted to do this or that in life, but it’s too late. He’s dead. It’s all over for him. He might have wanted to straighten his life out, but he can’t now. It’s over!”

Willimon remembers looking around the congregation and wondering to himself, “Where in the world is the comfort for this grieving family?”

The pastor went on, “But it ain’t too late for you! People drop dead every day. So why wait? Now is the day for decision. Now is the time to make your life count for something. Give your life to Jesus!”

Willimon says it was the worst thing he ever heard. As he rode home with his wife, Patsy, he asked, “Can you imagine a preacher doing that kind of thing to a grieving family? I’ve never heard anything so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate. I would never preach a sermon like that.

Patsy agreed that it was tacky and manipulative. “Of course,” she added, “the worst part of it all is that what he said was true.”

It’s easy to be fooled into thinking that there’s time for everything we may want to do in life. Take our church family, for example. We are just a few years away from celebrating our 300th anniversary – we will do that in the year 2031.

And many of us expect to be around at that time; but we also know that this church family will surely look a little different than it does now. Some of our church family will join the church triumphant. Some that we do not yet know will join us. There are a variety of things that will happen.

It speaks to the challenge of savoring every moment, to seize every day, to take full advantage of life, and all that it brings. And this is especially true regarding our life of faith!

Isn’t it wonderful that God has waited, and, in some cases, many cases, God continues to wait for us to completely trust him?

Many say that they love the Lord their God with all their heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, but has their spirit made that profession?

This morning’s parable should not cause us to live in fear. I recall how it was that when John Calvin

first introduced his doctrine of predestination, it was a doctrine of assurance. At a time when that new expression of the church was being told by the previous church that, for having left, someone's spiritual welfare was very much in jeopardy.

It was Calvin who helped to infuse into that spiritual culture the knowledge that you simply cannot make a sincere profession of faith, without God in your heart.

There is obviously much more to predestination than that. But that was when predestination was in its infancy. A word of comfort. A word of assurance, that when God helps us to know that we are His child. We are God's children!

The questions are: "Do we know that? Do we believe it in our bones?" I mean, do we know that in our hearts? Oh, know this, there are some who don't ... and it is incumbent upon us as faithful followers of Jesus Christ to help them know ... because there will come a day when the only tomorrow is of eternal significance. And at that time – a time that we do not know – it won't matter what we're wearing; it won't matter how much oil we have in our lamps; it won't matter how much traffic we encountered along the way. The only thing that will matter is that we are faithfully, humbly, and gratefully standing before God ... in faith.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.