

November 12 – Alert for God

Matthew 25:1-13

There is the old joke, “Do you want to make God laugh? Just tell God your plans!” We want to be in control of our lives. We make plans for all contingencies except for the ones we don’t expect! Planning, expectations, mistakes and wisdom are all part of this parable.

Before we begin to unpack what it might be telling us, let us look at some of the problems this parable brings with it. It is actually more of an extended allegory. We get that Jesus is the bridegroom and so we assume the bridesmaids are the church in general or us individually as people of faith. We do not know enough about wedding customs in ancient Palestine to know if what is being described was normal wedding activities or not. This knowledge would help us to make sense of the other details, some of which seems contrived. After all, who can go and buy oil at midnight? All the shops would be closed. Why would the five wise bridesmaids not share? If that was impossible, could not two walk forward in the light of one lamp? The ending statement of judgement, where the unprepared are shut out, seems harsh and unloving. Would any of us want to experience this kind of judgement where one little misstep would lead to these horrific consequences? So, with these questions what do we do with this parable? How do we make sense of it today?

The parable knows only one distinction between the wise and the foolish girls. It characterizes five as wise because they bring extra oil, and it renders five as foolish for failing to do so. Otherwise, they all act the same. They arrive on time. They are dressed in their festive garments. They wait, they tire and they fall asleep. Awakened, they all trim their lamps. But when the bridegroom arrives, the foolish ones find their oil going out. The five wise ones, claiming they have only enough oil for themselves, will not share. So the foolish five go out for more oil, finding the door shut upon their return. They miss out. Preparation marks the only distinction.

Preparation or readiness in Matthew is, of course, living the life of the Kingdom, living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount and in other parables by

Jesus. When this parable was first shared it was believed that Jesus would return soon, likely during the lifetime of the believers. Challenges to be faithful, to stay alert, and to make decisions focused on the moment all make sense in that environment. But two thousand years have gone by since Jesus walked the earth. It is difficult, if not impossible, to have the intense focus of preparation that this parable seems to be calling for. Yet, the call to be prepared and to live faithfully for God, no matter what, is still one that God lays upon us. Many of us can do this for a short while, but when the kingdom is delayed, the problems arise. Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year when the hostility breaks out again and again, and the bridegroom is delayed. Being merciful for an evening can be pleasant, being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires preparedness. Hearing the call to be prepared we must ask, "What is required from us to have this kind of life of faith?"

The first, seemingly insignificant but not really, thing we need to hear is that we have to "Show up." We tend to focus on the five foolish bridesmaids when we read this parable but I think about it in a larger context. If this were a true wedding in a small village all would be invited to the wedding. As in another of Jesus' parables where the king has a wedding for his son and some do not attend, there would have been other girls in the village who don't show up to wait for the bridegroom. We sometimes forget how important it is to show up. By attending worship, being involved in mission activities, reading our Bibles, holding others in prayer and practicing other faith disciplines we are doing the first and most important part of living a faith of preparedness. We are showing up. One of the things that saddens me as a pastor is to witness people who quit showing up. I am not talking about people who quit attending here and go other places because they are not feeling that we are meeting their spiritual needs. That happens and it is to be expected. It is why we have different churches with different emphasis. What I am talking about are those who just quit, for whatever reason, being involved in organized religion. Now again, I am not talking about those who cannot participate because of health issues. I am talking about those who start attending once a month then every other month and then maybe once or twice a year. They quit showing up because they believe they are doing fine. They have a plan. They

can be faithful at home. And then the bridegroom is delayed. Things don't go according to plan and life becomes challenging.

So celebrate that, by being here today, you are doing one of the most important things you can do for faith. You are engaged with a faith community and through it finding help, and hope, and love for the living of your lives.

The second part of preparedness is to expect the unexpected, to never take things for granted. We get into trouble when we have our plan and expect life to go according to our plan. That is really the story of the parable. All the bridesmaids came ready for the wedding. They were to wait for the coming of the bridegroom and then go with him to the marriage feast. Some of these actions are confirmed as practices related to marriage ceremonies, though Jesus expands on them. If everything had gone according to plans all of the bridesmaids would have met the bridegroom and gone to the party. Some assumed that their preparation was adequate while others entertained the idea that maybe things would not go according to plan and so thought about contingencies. The extra oil is the oil of preparedness. It is something that cannot be shared.

Let me share with you what I mean. You see who has the oil of preparedness when a crisis happens in their life. Some scream why me? They assume that faith should protect them from such problems and feel betrayed. Others, still reeling from the news, turn to the church and say, "Help me." They know the help will be there because they have been there for others in the past. Or, I meet with people who are confronting the impending death of a loved one. Some say, "I thought we had more time." Life is not going according to plan. All of a sudden, all of those unsaid things that should have been said, all of those activities that were put off loom large, and now they feel regret for what wasn't. Others will say, "I am glad for the life we had, the joys shared, and the words spoken." They lived each day as if it was their last. They feel as acutely the impending loss, but with less regret because they didn't assume that they would have lots of tomorrows.

Where do you need to be better prepared for the unknown? Where do you need to fill your containers with the oil of preparedness? If you think you know the plan for your life, step back from it for a moment and ask, "Am I ready to handle the unexpected?" Sometimes this means handling basic things like wills and medical directives and such. People put them off because they have plenty of time! In the realm of faith it means asking, "Have I forgiven people as I know I am commanded to do? Have I released hatred and anger? Am I living each day fully trying to be faithful to God? Am I prepared to trust when things don't go according to plan?" These are the kinds of things that we are challenged to do.

This kind of preparation is hard, no it is impossible to do on our own. We can only be prepared this way when we connect to one another in faith, support each other in faith, and each and every day ask God's spirit to fill us and help us to be faithful. When we quit relying on our plans and trusting in God and doing what we can to expect the unexpected, then we are learning the lessons of this parable.

At the beginning of the life of faith, you cannot really tell the followers of Jesus apart. They all have lamps; they are all excited about the wedding; they all know how to sing, "Lord, Lord." Deep into the night when we spot some persons attempting in vain to fan a dying flame to life, we begin to distinguish wisdom from foolishness. May we be wise in God's way and if we realize we have been a bit foolish, and that means all of us, there is no better time than today to begin to make changes, to start filling our containers with the oil of preparedness.