

A PARABLE OF PREPAREDNESS

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson,
Pastor, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA
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*"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise."
Matthew 25:1-2*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

This is the Word of the Lord! It's an ominous word. It speaks of a shut-door, of foolish bridesmaids excluded from a wedding reception. It speaks of a Lord who tells foolish bridesmaids, "I never knew you." It's an alien word to most of us. We're used to hearing a different note in preaching. You've heard me speak *often* about the open door of salvation. You've heard me speak of how the Gospel is inclusive. You've heard me speak of how Christ knows us even when we don't know him. But this parable has a different tone. A tone of judgment! A tone of warning! A shut door! Exclusion! I never knew you!

Wedding stories are supposed to be happy. Sure, weddings always create tension. Nerves are taunt. We want the wedding to go well. Make sure the best man has the rings! Don't forget the corsages! Somebody always comes late but the ushers never exclude them. I heard of one foolish bridesmaid who forgot to bring her gown to the wedding. Left it in her motel room. The wedding party was irritated. The bride's mother was furious. But the foolish bridesmaid wasn't excluded. The wedding was delayed until she retrieved her gown. Everything turned out beautifully. And the bride and groom will laugh about the foolish bridesmaid for years to come.

But there's a sombre note in the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. A note of *selfishness*. The wise bridesmaids seem self-centered. Why couldn't they share a little oil? It makes me think of what happens in an economic recession. Why don't the employed cut back on their hours and share their work so nobody goes unemployed? It seems a little selfish not to share. But we all want to maintain our own lifestyle at the expense of our neighbor. And so in the parable it seems like the wise bridesmaids could have shared their oil. At least they could

have shared the light. The wise bridesmaids remind me of my boys when they were much younger. One of them would get a candy bar and the other two would say, "Hey, can I have some?" And he'd say, "No, there's not enough to go around. Go buy your own." In the same way the wise bridesmaids seem a little selfish when they refuse to share their oil. "Go buy your own oil."

When the foolish bridesmaids return to the wedding reception from buying oil they find the door shut. I can hear the door shutting. It's not the tinny sound of a screen door shutting. It's not the sound of a swinging door, like the door to our choir that goes *wonk, wonk, wonk*. I hear the sound of a heavy, solid, oak door slamming shut. *Boom!* It's a bass boom. I hear the sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. When the foolish bridesmaids arrive, they knock. "Lord, open to us." We expect the Lord to be a little peeved but we're not prepared for what he says. He tells them, "I do not know you." Vindictive! The whole parable seems more like a nightmare than the Word of the Lord. But Jesus says this is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

I don't like this parable. I like **the parable of the lost coin** where God is like a woman who searches her house for a little coin until she finds it. That's good news. Even if I'm no more aware of God than a coin is aware of its owner, God values me and will find me. I like that. And I like **the parable of the lost sheep** where God is a shepherd who goes looking for a lost sheep until he finds it. That's good news. No matter how far I wander, God is going to find me. And I like **the parable of the prodigal son** where God is like a father who stands at the end of the lane watching for his son to come home and when he does, runs to meet him. That's good news. No matter how foolishly I've mispent my time and talents, God will welcome me home. I like those kind of parables. But I don't like the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaid with its message of exclusion, a shut door, and the Lord saying, "I never knew you."

Some Biblical scholars think Jesus couldn't have told this parable. They say the parable was placed on the lips of Jesus by Christians in the early church who wanted to exclude some

professing Christians. They say that when Jesus didn't immediately return after his ascension, they made up the parable to warn Christians to be prepared for a long wait.

But I disagree. I believe Jesus *did* tell this parable. I agree with professor N.T. Wright who argues that this is exactly the type of parable someone would tell who, like Jesus, was accepted as a prophet. The Old Testament prophets were always warning people. Wright argues that the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids compliments other things Jesus said about wisdom and folly. He talked about **the foolish man who built his house on sand** and the wise man who built his house on a rock. He talked about **the foolish farmer** who tore down his barns and built larger ones taking no thought of his mortality. He talked about **the foolish person who was excluded from a wedding reception** because he didn't wear appropriate clothing. So the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids isn't unique. Jesus told a number of parables of warning.

Maybe we ought to admit that Jesus isn't all sugar and cream. He isn't always meek and mild. Sometimes he warns people - like a parent warns their children. Hear the parable from the standpoint of a parent of teenagers. Hear the note of loving concern. "If you don't study you're going to hear doors shutting throughout your life. Unless you get a good education you won't even get your foot in the door for a interview." A parent warns her daughter about to depart on a long trip, "Don't take foolish risks. Fill up the gas tank. Don't run out of gas at midnight in the middle of nowhere. Nobody's going to open doors for you in the middle of night." Jesus gives us that kind of loving warning.

Christians should be wise, not foolish. With a little wisdom a lot of tragedy can be avoided. It's foolish to get into a car without putting on seat belts. It's foolish not to check the oil every time you get gas. It's foolish not to check the air pressure in your tires before a trip. You can save yourself a lot of expense with a little wisdom.

Kay and I are forever clipping articles from the newspapers and sending them to Andrew and Philip. **A Penn State girl recently** celebrated her 21st birthday by going with her friends from one bar to another until she had consumed 21 shots of whiskey - she was rushed to the

You can take them to Sunday School

children but it can't be done. You can lend your Bible but not your faith. People want to borrow the church. That's great. We lend the building but we can't lend the church. The church is something we have to involve ourselves in. We have to invest ourselves in the life of the church. We have to rejoice with it when it succeeds. We have to give sacrificially to it, work in it, make its life our life, and weep when it fails. When that happens we become a part of the church but we can't loan that to anybody. We have to do that on our own. You can't borrow another's person's relationship to Christ. You can't borrow faith (B. Thieleman).

Jesus lived in the real world. He lived in a world where tragedies can happen. We have no control over some tragedies. But some disasters can be averted. And when we see them coming we're foolish not to prepare to avert them. Part of the prophetic tradition is to warn people of the consequences of foolish actions.

But there's good news. The door is still open. It was open for King David after he committed adultery and murdered Uriah. The door was open for Peter after he denied Christ. The door was open for Paul after he persecuted Christians. The door was open for the thief on the cross who asked Christ to remember him. The door is open for all of us as long as we live. "Ask and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you." The only closed door that need concern us is the closed door to our own hearts. Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in and dine with them, and they with me." Be wise. Open the door. Give Christ a chance.

O Lord our God, you are always more ready to bestow your good gifts upon us than we are to seek them. You are more willing to give than we desire or deserve. Help us so to seek that we may truly find, so to ask that we may joyfully receive, so to knock that the door of mercy may be opened for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.