

Sleepers Awake!

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, November 7, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Matthew 25:1-13.

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

I've been to many weddings in my life time but I've never seen any guests locked out for arriving late. We sing, "Get me to the church on time" because arriving late for a wedding is fairly common. I'm often asked to delay the ceremony because Aunt Hilda or Uncle Harry haven't arrived yet. But in today's Gospel lesson the bridesmaids are locked out of the ceremony because they get there late. "And while they went to buy (the oil), the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'"

Note the finality of it all. The bridegroom comes at midnight, the dead of night - and the darkness casts its pall over the whole story. Those who are ready go in with him, and the door is shut. And when the other guests arrive at the door, having replenished the oil in their lamps, the lord of the banquet not only denies them entrance; he also denies that he even knows them. Nothing could be more

final. The latecomers are cut off. ~~They're left in hell.~~ *They miss the joy and fellowship of the wedding feast.*
of the Kingdom of heaven. This is hell - not so much torture but loss - loss of joy...
loss of fellowship.

What Matthew the Evangelist has given us here, isn't so much a wedding story as a judgment story. No celebrations! Not even a bride is mentioned. Only the delay of the bridegroom, his coming at midnight (the time of judgment) and the consequence of his coming - separation! A division into two groups: the five wise bridesmaids who go in to the wedding feast, and the five foolish maidens who are

excluded from it.

why does he remember to include it?

So why does Matthew tell this story of Jesus? What's he trying to say? ~~He's trying to educate his Palestinian congregation in what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. His picture is a severe one. The Gospel according to Matthew is not all "good news".~~ Matthew was writing his Gospel in critical times. Most scholars believe that he wrote it about 70 years after the birth of Christ, or, about 40 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Forty years had passed since Jesus ascended into heaven. A generation of Christians had been born and died. ^{Some} Many Christians ^{still} who could remember when Jesus had walked the earth and healed the sick, ^{They had} ~~had~~ expected Jesus to come back within their lifetime to establish his kingdom. Most of the people who had known Jesus before his death and resurrection ^{through} had passed from the scene. They'd died. Their hope for the establishment of the kingdom of God hadn't been fulfilled. They prayed, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" but instead of the kingdom coming, ~~persecution and~~ death came.

Momentous historical events had also occurred. Jerusalem had fallen to the Romans and been sacked and burned. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. Not one stone was left laying upon another. Jews and Christians living in Palestine had suffered great persecution and deprivation. The end of the world must be near and Jesus would return and set things straight. But he didn't come. The years passed. Those who knew Jesus in the flesh died. Matthew's little Palestinian church felt the pressure of disappointment and despair. Some were

leaving the church and falling away from Christ.

So- Matthew writes his Gospel to warn his congregation. ~~Being a citizen of the kingdom of heaven is, for Matthew, the most serious business in the world.~~

Christians must be prepared if Christ's return is delayed still further. The foolish Christian expects Jesus to return soon and at an expected time. So sure is the foolish Christian of the immediate return of Jesus that they aren't prepared for the long haul.^{They quit their jobs, they live in idleness, waiting.} When persecution comes, they give in. And so they are locked out of the joy of dining in the kingdom of God. The wise Christian, however, is prepared for a long wait. The wise Christian isn't surprised when things get darker and darker and grow worse and worse. The wise Christian believes that Christ will return but is prepared for the long haul. The wise Christian doesn't expect everything to be joy and happiness and light. The wise Christian prepares for dark days.

~~Our circumstances may not be a whole lot like Matthew's and his church. But we still can learn something from what he has to say. Especially, we Presbyterians, in the Reformation tradition need to hear what Matthew says in his Gospel. We've been reared on the words of St. Paul, "justification by faith without works of the law". But the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew seem to say something radically different. Paul emphasizes the grace of God. Matthew emphasizes good works. Paul talks about Christians being "in Christ". Matthew talks about following Christ. Paul sees Jesus as the fulfillment of the law. Matthew describes Jesus as the giver of a new and weightier law.~~

Sometimes the emphasis of Paul... his emphasis on God's grace given to us freely... encourages us to deny our own responsibility. "We're helpless sinners, but God is gracious to sinners." In the Gospel of Matthew, however, we hear Jesus issuing radical demands for obedience... give up everything to follow me... you must be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect... if your right hand offends you, cut it off. Jesus calls for radical obedience in the Gospel of Matthew. For Matthew, radical obedience to the word of Christ is what is required of citizens of the kingdom of heaven. The parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids tell us what's required of the citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

First, the citizen of heaven chooses between two ways: the way of the wise and the way of the foolish. Matthew talks about these two ways throughout his gospel. He talks about the broad way that leads to destruction and the narrow way that leads to life. He talks about the wise man who built his house on a rock, and the foolish man who built his house on sand. And in our Gospel lesson for this morning he tells us about the foolish maidens who took their lamps but forgot their oil, and the wise maidens whose lamps were well supplied with oil. So there's a choice to be made, a decision that has to be taken.

Within the church today there are wise and foolish men and women. Wisdom has nothing to do with how well educated you are. Wisdom has nothing to do with how smart you are. Wisdom is more like common sense. Wisdom has to do with making wise choices. Highly intelligent and well educated men and women as well as poorly educated people can make foolish choices that ruin the rest of their lives.

Deep Trip to Maine

As we're all faced with momentous choices in our lives, the wise Christian seeks to make choices in the light of ^{what is best in the long run} eternity; not in the light of what is ^{easiest} expedient in the present.

As Christians, we're faced with many momentous decisions: what high school courses should I take? Should I enter the service after high school or should I go to college or a trade school? Should I just try to find a job somewhere? Who should I marry? Does God even want me to be married? What is the wise decisions to make concerning my health; should I, or should I not, take the

chemotherapy or undergo the surgery? The church is a place where God's people ^{witness} gather to pray, study the word of God, worship God and ~~serve~~ ^{minister} the world - constantly ~~seek to make wise decisions as they pray and study and worship together.~~ seeking wisdom from on high for the choices we make

~~Second, the citizen of the kingdom of heaven chooses the way of active~~

~~obedience to the commandments of Jesus.~~ In his Gospel, Matthew tells us that ~~the~~ ^{there is a wide way, a foolish way; Broad way - narrow way; wise men build - foolish;} wise person is the one who doesn't just hear the words of Jesus, but does them.

The foolish person is ~~the hypocrite, the one who~~ hears the words of Jesus ~~and~~ but doesn't do them. The foolish person simply offers sacrifices to God, the wise person show mercy as well. The foolish person is satisfied with a ritual kind of purity like not smoking, not swearing, not drinking alcohol. The wise person, on the other hand, is concerned about more; about purity of heart. The foolish person only tithes but the wise person seeks justice as well.

Isn't the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids realistic? Isn't ^{it} true to life as we know it. We live in a world where foolish choices carry with them life-long woes. If we make foolish choices with the environment, ^{waste} ~~waste~~ our oil and other

natural resources, there could come a day when the damage can't be undone. A foolish choice in the way we express our sexuality or in our choice of a spouse can result in deep sadness and loss. Foolish choices we make in life follow us to the grave.

of The wise & foolish bridesmaids
The parable ~~doesn't really contain a lot of good news. It~~ contains a warning.

Keep awake, for you know not the day or the hour.

Let us pray: O God, your blessed Son came into the world that he might destroy the works of evil and make us children of God and heirs of eternal life. Grant that, having this hope, we may purify ourselves as he is pure; that, when he comes again with power and great glory, we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.