

In order to fully appreciate
the parable of the 10 virgins,
it is helpful to know
what a Jewish wedding looked like
in Jesus' day.

First came the engagement,
which was usually worked out
by the parents of the
bride and grooms
often when both
bride and groom
were children.

Once they were of marrying age,
the betrothal occurred.

The betrothal could last
for weeks, months or even a year.
It was a time
of preparation for the groom
A time to establish himself
and prepare a home for the bride,
often a room in his own family's house.

At the betrothal,
The groom would prepare a
marriage contract
which he would present
to the bride and her father.

To see if the proposal was accepted,
the young man
would pour a cup of wine
for his intended.

If she drank from the cup
the proposal was accepted.
If she did not drink
the covenant was void.

Finally, there was the wedding feast.
It all started
when the groom
accompanied by his groomsmen
came to the bride's house.

The time of the groom's arrival
Was uncertain.
So, the bride and her maids
Prepare and then wait —
sometimes for hours.

If the bridegroom came
from any distance,
there was just no telling
when he would arrive.
But since the bridegroom
was the most highly honored guest
He would be warmly welcomed
regardless of his arrival time.

To announce his coming,
the groom and his party
would give a shout
or blow a shofar
as they neared
the bride's house
to tell her to be ready.

Once the groom and his attendants
Met up with the bride and her maids
They would parade through the streets
Announcing that the wedding feast
Was about to begin.

This often occurred
in the late evening,
and so we see the need for
torches/lamps.

Not only would lamps
provide the light needed
to walk the darkened paths and streets,
but the lamps helped to identify
the wedding party.

Today we hear of those
Who took their identity
As bride's attendants seriously
who were prudent
and prepared for the groom's coming,

no matter when it happened .

They brought what they needed
to sustain their waiting.

Those who were foolish
Did not see themselves
In light of their role as
Bride's maids
They had not brought a supply of oil
to keep their lamps lit.

And so they missed the celebration
While trying to prepare
too little, too late.

This parable shows us
That our identity is important
And that we must do what it takes
To prepare what is needed to fulfill
that role.

We don't often think about
Preparing for or practicing
for our role as Christians.
We don't think of sustaining the
Flame of our lamp of faith.

But we do expect it
in other areas of our life.

If I tell you
that I am going to run a marathon,
You will expect
that I am making changes
in my life that will allow me
to do this.

I have probably been running
at intentional distances
and schedules
for months.
I will have purchased
the correct shoes,
And the right clothing,
to allow me to accomplish this race.

I also have probably changed my diet
in the months and weeks
leading up to the run and
I have probably purchased special
protein bars and liquids
to sustain me for the marathon itself.
And, as I train for my marathon,
I may find that I seek out
a community of those
who also like to run.

I may subscribe to a runner's magazine.
I may join an online community
and seek out other runners

and experts for advice
on how to improve
my readiness and performance.

When I introduce myself,
I might even identify myself
by saying, "I'm a runner."

In short, my being ready for the run
is not an accident.

I don't wake up and find
that I've accidentally been running
a training schedule for a marathon
or find that surprisingly,
I've been issued a number
and have arrived ready to run
the many miles ahead.

Things that are
important to us
and that form us
require training,
practice, and
attention to detail.

Our vocation

as the baptized
requires no less.

If we abandon the idea
that being a Christian
means believing
a certain thing
and instead
define our Christian identity
as an intentional
way of living
then we are ready
to prepare what is needed
to keep our lamp alight with fire.

One of the ways
to feed the flames
of our faith
is through practice.

Now, I don't mean practice
as in practice makes perfect,
although just showing up,
as the foolish virgins did,
is at least the first step!

I mean immersing ourselves
in the practices of faith:
by being a viable part
of the community of the faithful.

Brian McClaren,
one of my favorite authors
says that we must "learn Christ -
as if Christ were a language
or skill or art we must practice."

He says that
"Pilgrimage, fasting,
sacred meal, common prayer,
giving, Sabbath
and the liturgical year
are ancient practices
that have formed us"
through centuries of waiting
for Christ to come again.

And what's more significant
is what practices
they counter.

"For example, pilgrimage leads us
to embrace the unfamiliar and reject
nationalism, ethnocentrism and racism.

Fasting builds self-control
and weakens gluttony, lust and greed.

The sacred meal
that's at the center
of our worship together

calls us to reconciliation
with God and neighbor,
banishes self centeredness and
bitterness.

Common prayer, so essential in
Our church counters drudgery,
Illuming the ordinary in our life with
the colors of the sacred.

Giving, or stewardship
bridges the gap
between rich and poor
and begins to heal the
expanse that yawns between them.

Sabbath frees the worker
from the external tyranny
of exploitation
and the internal tyranny
of workaholism.

And the liturgical year
Defies amnesia and apathy
With shared memory and anticipation.

Spiritual practices
are about training ourselves
to become the kinds of people
who experience
Life with a capital L

and God with a capital G.

Paying attention
and being prepared
to walk each day
as a disciple of Christ
requires a decision.

Not an altar call
but a decision that Christ,
Christ crucified and risen
Is how we define ourselves and our
lives.

It means knowing that we have
a role to play in God's kingdom
and be willing to prepare ourselves
to fulfill it.

Spiritual practices
help us fill the gap
between the person we want to be
and the person
our lifestyle and choices
are actually forming.

By God's grace
we have been invited
to the wedding feast.
God has prepared the banquet
and the shofar has sounded

and we are given
the joyful requirement
of attentiveness and response.

Adding oil to our own lamps
through intentional practice
of spiritual disciplines,
prayer and worship
will allow us
to respond with joy
and light the world around us
by our very lives.

Amen.