

Have a Plan or Two

Jesus' wisdom on planning for us today

Matthew 25:1-13

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Rev. Dr. Dawn Jeffers Ramstad

Hudson United Methodist Church

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Most of Jesus' parables do not require a great deal of explanation for ordinary folks because he generally sticks to experiences and images common around the globe. A father with two sons, a lost sheep that could really be any domesticated animal, a woman's lost coin (see Luke 15) are some of his best-known parables. Then there is this one, the one on preparation that is set very specifically in the way weddings were held in Jesus' human lifetime.

While weddings are common in human cultures, wedding traditions vary widely. They also evolve, sometimes gradually and sometimes abruptly. One Twin Cities news program ran a piece this last week about the impact of COVID 19 on wedding receptions—which are much more extravagant than the cake and coffee reception after the ceremony that John and I hosted in our church's basement fellowship hall in 1986.

Early on Monday while thinking about how to explain everything going on in this parable, when my thinking was interrupted by our weekly worship debriefing meeting. Every Monday our worship team meets, now by Zoom, to review what went right and what was wrong, missing, or confusing in our worship service offered the day before. In last Monday's meeting, I shared with the team how explaining the traditions in this parable well could take my full sermon time. That is when Darci Strutt McQuiston offered to share a children's song she had written for this Scripture. Ask and you shall receive! And we would like to share her lyrics with you here.

Be Prepared

Based on Matthew 25:1-13

Words and music by Darci Strutt, used with permission

There was a wedding party for a bridegroom and his bride.

They were late arriving; ten gals had to wait outside.

Five of them were well prepared with extra oil too.

Five of them didn't bring enough to wait that long night through.

Have all you need to finish the task before you even begin.

Be prepared for what's ahead the unexpected may sneak in.

Things are often fun to start but have a solid plan

Or you might just look foolish and not finish what you began.

Friends may want to help you if some days you don't plan well,

But its best to be prepared because you can never tell

They might not have quite enough both for themselves and you.

Think about what you might need for what you plan to do.

Have all you need to finish the task before you even begin.

Be prepared for what's ahead the unexpected may sneak in.

Things are often fun to start but have a solid plan

Or you might just look foolish and not finish what you began.

“Be prepared.” As I paraphrased Jesus’ parable for this Veteran’s Day weekend, my mind went to what I have witnesses in all veterans of the impact of basic training and A school as preparation for life.

Since Veteran’s Day 2019, our oldest son became a Navy veteran. We are immensely proud of him. In his move to civilian life, he has also discovered motivation from his new job with the Department of Energy for finally getting his Bachelor of Science completed. Much like his mother, our son hates going to class for the sake of going to class. Going to class to learn more about something we care about is never a problem. It is fun! But the required English classes that for me were an inspiration for my future vocation were for him were only checking a box for graduation requirements. Our widely differing attitudes on the necessity of learning to write well were our largest source of conflict in his senior high years. Little did we

know in those years of struggle that Navy recruiters were looking for bright young people like our son children, bright minded people who hate busy work and the constantly shifting focus of most American senior high schools, as the ideal candidate to give the keys for nuclear aircraft carriers and submarines.

So, it is with great delight that I now am finally able to effectively serve as our veteran son's editor as he completes his liberal arts writing requirements. Not only does he have motivation and means provided by the DOE and Veteran's Affairs, but he also now has the life experience from time spent well in the Navy to know that he needs to be prepared for writing effectively in leadership, a lesson he did not want to learn in senior high school. And who better for a new vet to ask for coaching advice on writing than from his mother, a Methodist preacher?

And what parable would Jesus make of ten veterans' lives? 'Those ten brides' maids in his parable were all young women waiting for a single joyous event, the arrival of the groom. If we move that to nuclear machinist's mates, in basic training and A school they are all preparing for a single grim event—taking a nuclear vessel out of port and into naval combat. Being unprepared and left on their own to live with the consequences is not an option.

But what if there was a follow-up parable for the five bridesmaids who did not have oil for their lamps? Would Jesus have them make the same error twice? Or would they be prepared the second time?

Jesus certainly could have turned this into a fine parable about learning from our past mistakes to be prepared for our future. It is good for us all to finish well and then ask ourselves "What went right? What was wrong, missing, or confusing? What changes will we make next time?" But he was more interested in preparing the Church for the joy of his return than he was in preparing us to do something better next time.

As we continue through this COVID era, our church has begun publishing a weekday blog. The Daily Church Epistle (The DCE) is sent out to our e-mail list, mailed to our non-internet users, and posted on our church web site (umchudson.org). As the COVID era grinds on, our DCE writers are stepping into preparing us all for the future that will arrive like a bridegroom returning from war. We are getting ready for what is to come.

When World War I ended, it was followed by an influenza pandemic which began in 1918 and lasted into early 1921. One important answer history provides for our future planning is this, after three years the pandemic came to an end and life went on. Life did not go back to the state of war it was in before the flu pandemic but went on to a period of economic boom now called The Roaring Twenties. One of the outcomes of that era was great growth in organized religion of all kinds, including the Christian church.

So how can we as a local church in the COVID era be prepared for our future?

We can draw vision from both the future and the past. Our hoped-for future is to be a church for all generations here in Hudson, a people with a place where all are welcome and invited to walk daily with Christ. To that end, our Accountable Leadership Board (ALB) has been using the 2019 surveys of all our ideas to improve our building and is getting ready to challenge you with their vision for our building. It is a vision that takes outreach seriously, and it is a vision that considers all generations with worship as our central shared passion.

Our immediate hoped-for future is to invite new people to join us in following Christ. Some of this is done through our podcast. Some of it is done now by word of mouth. Soon, we hope, it will be done with sanctuary worship. To this end we are asking you to actively support our shared mission through prayer and first fruit offerings. You planned first fruit offerings are the oil for our lamp as we seek to shine with Christ's light for all of Hudson in this difficult COVID era.

To prepare spiritually right now, some of us are drawing inspiration by studying 1 Thessalonians through a written study in our Thursday DCE's. The Daily Church Epistle was inspired last March when I first realized the New Testament epistles were written for in times of great trial. 1 Thessalonians is one of our oldest Christian epistles, a letter from the apostle Paul, who was then in Athens, to the church he had helped plant in Thessalonica. When Paul wrote this early letter, the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor was rising. The Colosseum was under construction; soon Christians would be dying there for believing and teaching that Jesus the Christ was and is the Son of God. One thing the emperors understood correctly, the combination of Christian belief and behavior could bring down their empire more effectively than any war.

As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he was one of the first Christians to comprehend that Christ may not return in his lifetime and he could be put to death for preaching the Gospel. Therefore, he needed to be certain to put "oil in the lamps" of his successors so they could pass the Gospel of Jesus Christ on to us. And that is where a first century Middle Eastern bridesmaid is the perfect person for a parable about being prepared for bad times to end and a joyous future to arrive.

Five of the bridesmaids believed and prepared for the groom to arrive. Five bridesmaids failed to prepare for that joyful day. And while I may never fully understand why they could not share the oil for the lamps, I do know that Jesus was telling us we need to be prepared for future joy and blessing of his return.

The essential news about COVID from the medical experts is that we are going into an intense period of high infections for the next six to twelve weeks. It is possible that we could

need to be in lockdown like we were last March and April. But this time we be prepared for a lockdown, we can respond to our challenges rather than react. Our freezers and pantries can be stocked without hoarding, we can have on hand plenty of toilet paper and masks. Friends, we also need to prepare for our spiritual wellbeing. What spiritual habits are you cultivating in quarantine? What opportunities are you using now to fill your lamp with oil?

One ministry we have been able to embrace as a local church is to provide the means of spiritual preparation in this COVID time of social isolation. We are offering everyone spiritual oil for the lamp that is your life in Christ. One unseen person in Jesus parable is the person who sold oil for all ten bridesmaids' lamps. The five bridesmaids who took advantage of that resource filled their lamps were able to go to the wedding. We may not understand their customs, but we get Jesus' point. Prepare your self for the blessings that are still to come.

This COVID era will not last forever. Pandemics never do. But please, take time to fill your spiritual life and be ready for both that greatest day of all days when Christ comes again as well as the soon to arrive great day when our current pandemic is only a lecture in a class on world history.

Amen.