

CHRIST MEMORIAL CHURCH, NORTH BROOKFIELD, MA

SERMON

NOVEMBER 12, 2017

MATTHEW 25:1-13

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JESUS SAID, "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. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And when they went to buy it, 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.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

This morning's Gospel passage from Matthew is a parable from Jesus that provides a warning about our state of preparedness. In particular, preparedness for Jesus' second coming. In chapter 24 of Matthew's gospel, Jesus spent a lot of time explaining his second coming to the disciples on the Mount of Olives. So here at the beginning of chapter 25, he helps us understand how to be prepared for that eventuality.

Before we dive into the *preparedness* message of the parable, it might be good to take a minute or two to contemplate the second coming of Jesus, because that's really the long-range focus – that is the reason why Jesus gives us this stern warning about being prepared. If it is suggested by someone that we go to the trouble of preparing ourselves for something, we should know what it is we're going to be preparing ourselves for, so we can determine whether or not it's worth the effort. In this case, Jesus has told his disciples that at the end of the age he will be coming back "...with power and great glory to gather his elect from the four winds, from one

end of heaven to the other.” He goes on to say that the time of this is unknown, even to him – he only knows that the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour, and therefore we must be ready.

If we believe what Jesus tells us, that he is coming again, and his second coming will be sudden and unexpected, and at that time he will gather up his chosen ones, sorting the sheep from the goats, so that we can spend eternity in his glorious presence, then we will prepare ourselves for that day. If knowledge and belief are all that we need to start preparing, then for those of us who’ve heard this message and believe it, we’re likely to prepare ourselves for it. After all, we do have a longing for eternity woven into our hearts. However, despite our desire, we also have a human nature that comes into play, and many of us have a tendency to procrastinate when the deadline seems far off.

Preparedness is something we do well in certain areas of our lives, but not so well in others. On military installations they have operational readiness exercises and inspections. Civil first responder units conduct all kinds of disaster preparedness planning and training. Until about two weeks ago, Jimmy Garoppolo spent the better part of the last four years ensuring he would be fully prepared to enter a game in the event that Tom Brady was injured; he had to study continually to learn every play, and practice with the unit so as to be able to execute flawlessly in the event that he was called upon. Understudies in theater productions everywhere memorize every line just in case the leads are ever unable to perform. Something just about all of us can relate to: the season is almost here when we run to Hannaford's to buy milk and bread when the weatherman forecasts a big snowstorm....

When our *jobs* require us to maintain a level of preparedness, or when it’s in our *financial interest* to maintain a level of preparedness, or when our *survival* requires us to maintain a level of preparedness, we tend to do it. But when it comes to more discretionary preparation for our more distant future, we have a tendency to be a little less diligent. In part, this may be because the event we are preparing for is farther off into the future, and the timing is uncertain. For example, perhaps we have decided that we need to update a will that was written 20 years ago; we need to make an appointment with a lawyer, gather some paperwork, and think about how we would want to update it. We *could* start that today, but it's not really so urgent that it couldn't

wait until tomorrow, or next week, or next month... But then next month is busy with the holidays, so maybe we push it off until January... And then we get hit with a series of snowstorms in early January, and between the storms and the snow removal, we're too preoccupied and exhausted to follow up with updating our will, so we push it off until later, and besides, the chances are pretty good that nothing happens to us between now and when we get around to it in February... or March.... or... whenever we get around to it. It's a lower priority because we seem to have plenty of time.

In the case of the second coming, we're talking about something that followers of Jesus have been waiting for for 2000 years. At first, the earliest Christians believed the second coming was imminent. But as time went by, they started to wonder. The Thessalonians to whom Paul was writing in this morning's second reading (1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18) had been waiting for maybe about 20 years since Jesus' death on the cross, and they were already becoming discouraged that it was taking so long, as their friends and family members in Christ were dying and missing it. Here *we* are, 2000 years later, still waiting, and although there are signs that seem to indicate it might be getting closer, it still does not quite seem "imminent". It seems like there might still be quite a bit of time before that day arrives.

Because wedding customs in Palestine 2000 years ago were quite different from ours here in New England today, this parable may be a little hard to understand for many of us. But it was the custom in those days that the parents arranged the marriages between sons and daughters; there would be a betrothal, when the vows would be exchanged, and then the groom would go off for a year and prepare their new home for his bride. Then, after about a year's time, the groom would come back for his bride, and they would celebrate with a wedding banquet. The general time of his arrival - about what day that would be - might be known, but not the precise time. So the groom's arrival was expected, but the exact *time* of the arrival was uncertain.

As the time drew close, the bridesmaids would wait with the bride for the arrival of the groom. It was a joyful, festive time. When the groom finally did arrive, the party would proceed to the house the wedded couple would be moving into together, winding their way through as many streets and roads as they could along the way to let family and friends know that the time

for the banquet has come. When they got to the house, there would be week-long festivities and the bride and groom would be treated like royalty for the week.

Well, when the wedding party was parading through the streets, they were required to carry the lamps mentioned in the passage. These lamps were really more like torches than lamps. The purpose of them was two-fold: (a) to light your way in order to see where you're going, and (b) to light your face so others can make sure you're not someone who doesn't belong with the party. As the party arrived at the banquet, those who accompanied the bridegroom were admitted, then the door was closed.

So with all that as a backdrop, we can have a better understanding of what was happening in the parable, and with that understanding, there are probably two big questions that linger:

1. Why didn't the five foolish bridesmaids bring enough oil in the first place?
2. Why wouldn't the bridegroom open the door and let the five foolish bridesmaids into the wedding banquet when they got there?

As for the first question, there really is no specific answer. They were careless, or distracted, or they didn't believe they'd need extra oil, or they may have thought that if they *did* need it, they'd be able to get it - either by borrowing it from someone else, or by asking the party to wait while they ran out and bought some. Whatever the reason, they didn't think it was that important to bring extra oil. They didn't think it all the way through to stop and consider "what if I need more oil and can't get it at that time?"

As for the second question, this is the stern part of Jesus' message. God has been showing patience and mercy for 2000 years. At some point, there has to be a cutoff; eventually the judgment has to take place. Sometimes we just run out of time. Sometimes we don't get that extra chance. There are only so many extra chances to do the makeup work; only so many extensions to the deadline.... In the airport, if we arrive at the gate too late, we miss the plane; they might hold it for a bit, but not indefinitely. Eventually, the plane has to take off.

The bridesmaids all knew they would need torches to accompany the bridegroom to the wedding banquet. Whatever their reasons, the foolish bridesmaids didn't take enough care to

prepare themselves with enough oil to keep their torches lit as they accompanied the bridegroom to the banquet. Ultimately it just wasn't important enough to them, or they would have made sure to have it with them when the time came.

In the parable, the bridesmaids represent members of the Church. Jesus is warning us that when the time comes, there will be some church members who will accompany him to the banquet, which represents the kingdom of heaven, and many others who won't be ready on that day; and because the only way for any of us to be admitted is through Jesus, those who aren't ready will be left out. Since we don't know precisely *when* Jesus is coming, for those who are wise, the time to prepare is now.

How does one prepare for the arrival of the bridegroom? What is the "oil" we need to carry with us so that we can be sure our torches will light our way as we accompany the bridegroom to the wedding banquet? It is the saving grace through faith in Jesus – in his work on the cross that took the punishment that we deserve; faith in his love for us and his assurance that those who put their faith in him will be saved to be with him and to worship the holy and almighty God for all eternity. We fill our flasks of oil by giving up love-of-self in exchange for love of God and love of others; establishing and developing a relationship with Jesus, reading and heeding his Word; through prayer; and by trusting him completely, serving and following him through wherever and whatever he may lead us, right up to the door of the banquet where he may say, "Yes, this one may come in with me."

One final issue we need to examine before closing: Many of us may think, "It has been so long since Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead and ascended to heaven – 2000 years! We believe him when he tells us he's coming again, but it has been so long, and we don't know how much longer it may be before that day arrives. As crazy as this world may seem to be getting, it seems like it still may be a long time yet, and many - if not all - of us may not be here on that day when he finally arrives. So what does this warning about preparation for the second coming mean to me?"

We can look back at this morning's second reading for some help with that. Paul tells the Thessalonians that those who have died in Christ will rise first – through Jesus, God will bring

with him those who have died, to be with the Lord forever. The key is the phrase “in Christ” – through our faith in Christ. That same kind of preparation that needs to be made by those who are alive when the Lord comes again in order to be admitted to the wedding banquet is the same kind of preparation we need to make during our time here on earth. With oil in our flasks to keep our torches lit for the duration of the procession with Jesus, we may all be admitted into the glorious eternal wedding banquet.

Amen.