

Series: “Stories of God and Life”

Let me ask you a question. How much time did you spend this past week thinking about Jesus’ return? How much thought did you give to Jesus’ second coming? Hold on to your answer and we’ll come back to this later.

I once conducted a wedding in a little country church I served. It was near the time for the ceremony to start and the father of the groom was not there yet. It was a steamy hot summer day, and there was no air conditioning in the church. We waited, and sweated, and waited, and sweated. Finally we agreed to start the service without him. Sure enough, after we had begun, he eventually came rushing in and hurried down the aisle to his seat in the front. He was late. The family was embarrassed. He was unprepared.

The parable we are looking at today is often called the parable of the ten maidens (or virgins). Its focus is on five of the maidens who are unprepared for a wedding.

Wedding customs were much different in Palestine in the days of Jesus. A newly married couple didn’t go away on a honeymoon; they would go to their new home and have a gala wedding celebration that would last for days. Most of the people were peasants – poor – and this was one big moment in their life. Weddings were held after the harvest (don’t the Amish do that today?). The *approximate time* of the wedding was known by the bride and the bridesmaids, as well as the bride’s family, and they would wait together at her home. But, the festivities wouldn’t begin until the groom arrived and asked to see the bride. He would then escort the bride and her family to his home, leading a procession through the streets, often taking the longest route they could take, to get to the groom’s home. Then the party would begin! (It’s kind of like our custom of decorating cars on the day of the wedding, and then have the bride and groom be driven around with the car horns honking – although it seems we don’t do that anymore).

No one except the *father of the groom*, who had to prepare the festivities, would know the exact day and hour the groom would set out. A part of the excitement of the wedding was the anticipation and the waiting. Sometimes a groom would try to come unexpectedly and catch the bridal party by surprise.

In this parable, the groom comes in the middle of the night! Apparently there were 10 young women in this bridal party. Tired from waiting, they all fell asleep. But then someone shouts out, “The groom’s coming!” Quickly they try to pull themselves together. They will need oil for the lamps they will carry, since it’s dark. As they start to trim their lamps, five of them, for whatever reason, don’t have enough oil for their lamps. This parable is sometimes called the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. The word in the Greek text for “foolish”, is the Greek word *moros*, from which get the English word “moron”!

Look at what happens: “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’” (Matthew 25:8-9). So, by the time they are able to replenish their supply of oil, everyone else had arrived at the groom’s home, gone in, and the festivities had begun. The door was shut and locked.

“Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly, I tell you, I do not know you.’” (Matthew 25:11-12). They are shut out. They are out of luck.

This is a parable. Parables have one main point. Jesus seems to tell us what that point is in the next verse: “Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matthew 25:13). (i.e. the day nor the hour of the Lord’s return). Be ready! Be prepared!

This parable reminds us that Jesus will return! In His first coming He came in humility and weakness, as a baby. In His second coming, He will come in power and great glory, as King of kings and Lord of Lords!

Human history is moving towards a climax, a fulfillment. History is not just a meaningless, haphazard sequence of events, going nowhere. God is moving history towards that final day when Christ returns, and evil and death and everything opposed to God’s good purposes will be overcome and vanquished. History has a purpose and is ultimately in the hands of God!

In this parable, Jesus is teaching us that we are to be alert and ready for His return! The imagery here is of the bridegroom, and his bride. What does that bring to mind? Christ is the Bridegroom. The Church (believers), is the bride of Christ. One day He will come for His bride, and there will be a huge, cosmic wedding celebration! There will be joyful partying in His house! Think about it: No more pain or sorrow or death; no more hate and hurting each other; no more cancer or Alzheimer’s disease. And we’ll be with the Lord forever! *But we have to be prepared! Don’t run out of oil!*

How can we be prepared for the coming of the Bridegroom? What must we do to make sure we have enough oil in our lamps? ***First, by repenting of our sins and trusting in Christ to save us.***

This is a parable of the kingdom. “The kingdom of heaven will be like this” (Matthew 25:1). Jesus began His ministry with these words about the kingdom, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). When Jesus first came into the world and began His ministry, He said the kingdom of God was at hand; it was beginning to break into the world. When He returns, that kingdom will fully come. So we have to want to be part of God’s kingdom. We have to want God to rule and reign in our life.

Jesus said the way to get ready for the kingdom is to “repent” (turn around, change), and believe the gospel. The way we enter the kingdom is to humble ourselves, confess our sins, and trust Christ to save us. Whether we’re alive when Jesus returns, or whether we die before He comes back, either way, we will meet Christ. We will come before God. And the only way any of us can stand clean and pure before a holy God is if we have been made right with God by trusting in Christ and His shed blood on the cross. “What can wash away our sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

A second way we can be prepared for Jesus’ return is to ***live with a watchful attitude, and desire to put away what is evil and sinful.*** The Scriptures give some instructions on how to be ready

for Jesus' return.

For instance, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 says this: "Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober".

Be sober. This doesn't just mean don't have too much booze! It suggests living a cautious, serious lifestyle. Turning away from evil. Trying to live a clean life. The idea is summed up later in this passage: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23). The word "sanctify" means to set apart and make holy and clean.

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: "I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Timothy 6:13b-14). 1 John 2:28 says, "And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming." Abide in Christ, stay close to Him, seek to obey His commands and live a clean life, so that we will not be ashamed at His coming.

A third way we can prepare for the coming of Christ is this: ***Live by the Spirit.*** The oil in the maiden's lamps reminds us that in the Bible, oil is often a symbol of the Spirit of God. To be ready, and to have a full supply of oil in our lamps suggests that we should be filled with God's Spirit, and live by the Spirit. *It's good to empty our lives of all the crap and the bad stuff, but then we need to fill it with someone positive!*

Ephesians 5:18 says, "Be filled with the Spirit." When we confess Christ and turn our life over to Him, the Holy Spirit comes and lives in us. He prompts us to do God's will and do those things that please God. The Bible tells us what our life will be like when we are living by the Spirit, and the Holy Spirit controls us. We will exhibit the fruit of the Spirit in the way we live. Galatians 5:22-23 says, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Yield to the Spirit. Nurture the life of the Holy Spirit in us, so that in our private life and our relationships these qualities will be seen in our character and actions. *These are some of the ways we can be ready for Christ's return.*

Helmut Thielicke was one of the great preachers and authors in Germany in recent years. In a sermon on this parable, he said this: "With Jesus we do not know when he will come again or when he will summon us to come to him. We do not know the moment when everything that is so madly important to us – our careers, our success, our failure, and our dejection – will vanish. We do not know when he will become the only thing that has any importance to us. Therefore we must be on the lookout and be ready for him at any moment. For every single hour of our life

is marked with this one, unpredictable moment when *we shall stand alone and face Jesus Christ*. If we miss him, if we act as if our life would always go on as it has, if we go on sleeping and muddling through life like the foolish maidens, we shall have missed the point of our life.”

Billy Graham gave us a good summary of how we should view Jesus’ return. “We are to wait for the coming of Christ with patience. We are to watch with anticipation. We are to work with zeal. We are to prepare with urgency.”

Think about it: If only we lived with a healthy awareness that we will all face Jesus some day, and we will all have to give an account of our life to God, wouldn’t people act differently, and wouldn’t the world be a better place!

One point that the parable brings out is that *we can’t borrow oil from others*. The five foolish maidens begged the others to borrow some oil, but it didn’t happen. There are some things we can’t borrow from others. We can’t borrow someone else’s spirituality. We can’t sponge off someone else’s commitment to Christ. We can’t cash in on someone else’s relationship with God. It doesn’t matter that we may have a spouse who’s a believer, or an uncle who’s a minister or priest, or a brother or sister who prays and goes to church. Faith must be personal. I need to get ready – no one else can do it for me! Jesus’ words are for each of us: “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matthew 25:13).

A newspaper in Austin, Texas had this headline: “Man experiences heart attack after the rapture.” The news article related this incident: Herbert Washington, whom co-workers at Significant Plastics Inc. say was unduly concerned with the rapture and the second coming of Christ, suffered a serious heart attack when co-workers pretended they’d been caught away without him. Last Tuesday, they laid their work outfits on their chairs and hid in a supply room, and when Herbert came back from the restroom, he thought the rapture had occurred. The janitor, an outspoken Muslim, pretended to have witnessed everyone disappear and ran around the office feigning panic. Herbert fell to the ground clutching his heart and screaming, “I knew you’d forget me, Jesus! What did I do wrong?” He was taken to a local hospital. The employees emerged, sobered, from the supply room and gathered up their extra clothes. “We didn’t mean to scare him to death,” said one woman. “He’s just always talking about it, so today we decided to turn the tables on him.” Mr. Washington underwent bypass surgery and is recovering well and “digging into the Bible like never before,” said his wife.

So, back to the question I asked at the beginning of my message: How much time did you spend this past week thinking about Jesus’ return? I guess if we are honest, most of us probably didn’t even think about Jesus’ return. I’m not suggesting that we be obsessed about this, like Herbert Washington. But it is good if we pay attention to what Jesus says and don’t simply keep thoughts about His return totally off our radar screen!

The first Christians expected Jesus to come back right away. It would be just a matter of days. But then, when He didn’t return, it wasn’t long before some in the early church just kind of wrote it off, or scoffed at the idea of Him coming back. But just because He hasn’t returned after all

these years doesn't mean He won't! One of the reasons why God has delayed the return of Jesus is given in 2 Peter 3: 2 Peter 3:8-10 says, "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed." God is giving us humans extra time to be saved and get ready for Jesus return. So let's be prepared!

When I was working on this sermon, I couldn't help but think of that song we used to sing in Sunday School and at Vacation Bible School. Remember the words?

*"Give me oil in my lamp, keep my burning; give me oil in my lamp, I pray.
Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning; keep me burning 'til the break of day."*

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Community United Methodist Church
August 26, 2018*

