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Pentecost 24 – November 12, 2023

“The Tragedy of an Unprepared Life”

Read: Matthew 25: 1 - 13 and/or Memorize: Matthew 25: 13

There’s a story that comes from the sinking of the Titanic. A wealthy woman found her place in a lifeboat that was about to be lowered into the North Atlantic. She suddenly thought of something she needed, so she asked permission to return to her stateroom before they cast off. She was granted three minutes, and warned that if she took longer, they would leave without her.

She quickly ran across the deck that was already slanted at a dangerous pitch. Raced through the gambling room with all the money that had rolled to one side, ankle deep. She came to her stateroom and quickly pushed aside her diamond rings and expensive bracelets and necklaces as she reached to the shelf above her head and grabbed three small oranges. She quickly found her way back to the lifeboat, got in it and departed the ship.

Now, it seems incredible because thirty minutes earlier she would not have chosen oranges over the smallest of diamonds. But death had boarded the Titanic. One blast of its awful breath had transformed all values. Instantaneously, priceless things had become worthless; worthless things had become priceless. In that moment, she preferred three small oranges to a crate of diamonds.

Like that woman, there are events in life, which have the power to transform the way we live. Jesus’ parable about the ten virgins offers one such event. As I’m sure you realize the parable is about the second coming of Christ. Jesus doesn’t come right out and say that in the parable. Rather, He lets the story describe it for Him.

The woman on the sinking Titanic understood, in light of her current circumstances, that she must make preparations for living on a lifeboat. That which was precious would not suffice. Only the precious resource of food were vital. Likewise, in a world where Christ might return, we must be ready for that.

With each wedding I do, I always admonish those in the wedding party to make a special effort to be ready on the day of the ceremony. I frequently ask them to be at the wedding site an hour before hand. Unfortunately, I can tell you that my request does not always have any effect.

Jesus' parable about a wedding, is told from the vantage point of the ten young virgins who had been invited to participate in the happy occasion. He describes five as wise and five as foolish. What was the measure of that wisdom? In a word, their readiness to be part of the event. All of the young women had oil in their lamps, but five had an additional supply.

Why was that important? In our society weddings are announced for a specific time and place and normally happen at that time. In first century, Palestine, a wedding could happen any time within several days of the announced date. The uncertainty was considered part of the excitement of the wedding.

The bridegroom hoped to catch some of the bridal party napping. But fairness required that some announcement be made, so a messenger was sent through the streets shouting "behold the bridegroom comes." Those who were alert would respond while others might be left behind.

In Jesus' parable, the cry came at midnight. This was actually a very popular time. Most bridegrooms chose to come late at night. The sleeping attendants were awakened. It was then that they realized that they did not have enough oil in their lamps to get through the night.

Panicked, they attempted to borrow some from the wise virgins. They were unwilling to part with some of their oil. The reason is very simple: "If we give you our oil, there won't be enough for us. Hurry out to the dealers and buy some for yourself."

So, the foolish virgins hurried out, but by the time they returned the door had already been closed. They knocked on the door and pleaded to come in, but the groom said: "If you belonged in this event, you would already have been present." Jesus concludes: "Watch therefore for you know neither the day nor the hour."

What is this parable suggesting for us? I would like to advance several suggestions. First, it is saying somethings in life cannot be borrowed. You and I cannot live on someone else's oil. We can help one another in many ways, but at some point we are responsible for ourselves.

What does the oil represent? I believe the oil is the oil of faith. The road of the religious pilgrimage is a narrow one and it can only be walked two at a time, by you and God. No one else can walk it for you. I've heard many spouses laughingly say that the other spouse handles the religion stuff in the family. What they really are revealing is how little they understand about faith when they make that comment.

Faith is an intensely personal experience. Others can help and encourage you. They can pray for you, but in the end, you must embrace it yourself. The five foolish virgins were foolish because they thought they could rely on the resources of others. What they discovered is that there are some things in life that cannot be borrowed.

The parable reminds us there are some things that cannot be put off until the last moment. Just imagine that you live in a flood area, but you choose not to purchase any flood insurance. There hasn't been a flood in many years so why spend the money now?

But flood insurance is not something you can put off until the last moment. In the seconds that it takes to do tremendous damage, you don't have the time to get it.

Yet, so many of us fail to understand this concept when it comes to life's decisions. Over the years, couples have come, troubled. They had not bothered to darken the doorstep of a church for years. The problems had gone on for years, but now they had reached the peak. They come to the church because they see religion as the last effort before the divorce.

Why is it that so often we put off life's important decisions until the very last moment? Jesus identifies it very simply: it is because we are foolish. It was not that the foolish virgins lacked any desire. They genuinely wanted to participate in the celebration. It is just that they gave it insufficient forethought. All too often we believe that heaven can wait. Yet, it is the wise person who does not put off the matter of eternity to the very end.

The parable suggests that if we are not prepared, we can miss out on great opportunities. The issue here is one of the readiness for Christ's return. When God holds His grand celebration will we be ready? There is a genuine element to this theology: we need to understand that there is an element of judgement in this parable. When the foolish virgins arrived at the party, we are told: "the door was shut." Is God uncaring? Absolutely not! Both the wise and the foolish had the same opportunity. The foolish chose to be unprepared. The door being locked is a metaphor for God's judgement.

It reminds us that the door that God shuts, no man opens. When I was growing up, it was the time of the beginning of integration of many colleges in the south. In 1963, The governor of Alabama, George Wallace, stood at the door of the University of Alabama and denied entrance to two black students who sought to attend it.

He made a big show of it, to prove to those who thought like him that he was preventing this tragic event in their eyes. Did he ever apologize for that action? Only years later, as

he neared the end of his life did he openly admit that when he stood at that door, he was wrong. He went on to publicly apologize.

I affirm that change of mind in him. Yet, we cannot change history. In his great moment of history, he was not prepared and missed a great opportunity to advance rather than deny an important action that had to happen for the betterment of society.

There are stories like that throughout history. Where people take action that is contrary to the betterment of society, to win the approval of others. Only later on, do they admit that they were wrong and apologize.

It is great that history can note that apology and their retreat from their position, but that is not what they are remembered for. The tragedy will always be that when a great opportunity in history came, they were not prepared and missed it. And that is the tragedy of missed opportunities.

Jesus is telling us, in this simple parable, about the tragedy of the unprepared life. Jesus said that we are to, at all times, “be prepared, for no one knows the hour.” My friends, the best way to get ready for tomorrow, is to be ready today. A time will come when no further preparation is possible. That is the theme at the end of the church year. It is there to remind us of the great importance of preparation.

Over the years of ministry, I have met with many people who were dying. There is a common theme from many of them: they will say to me: “Pastor, if everything turns out alright, that’s ok. If everything does not turn out alright, well, that’s ok, too.” They are speaking the language of the five wise virgins. They were prepared to live; they were prepared to die. They have no fear of either.

As the Gospel reminds us, “All of the virgins slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry: “Behold the bridegroom. Come and meet him.” Those virgins who were prepared, Jesus called wise. Would He say that of you?

Count me in: How are you preparing now for God’s intended future for you?