

Isaiah 25:6-8

Matthew 25:1-13

November 8, 2020

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

READY OR NOT, HERE HE COMES

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Florence, a group of folks, with the help of volunteers from the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Program and FEMA officials, organized a long-term recovery group called the Disaster Recovery Group of Duplin County. The group will be two years old on January 7 and continues assist Duplin County residents in their recovery. Since March, the recovery group has been working within Covid-19 restrictions and has expanded its mission to help citizens affected by that disaster, primarily with food assistance.

Notice the name of the recovery group. Although it was formed in response to the disaster of Hurricane Florence, the group was organized to provide recovery assistance long after the Florence recovery is complete, whenever that may be. The board of directors is now working on a business plan as we apply for a 501(c)(3) non-profit status. That business plan requires demonstrating the sustainability of the disaster recovery group over the long-haul or, as one person put it, how to keep doing disaster recovery work when the “skies are blue” – including funding when the immediate sense of urgency in the days following a disaster is not as pronounced and “life gets back to normal.”

We have certainly been fortunate during this incredibly active hurricane season, unlike the poor folks along the Gulf Coast, especially in Louisiana. But we know it’s just a matter of time. Each year in late April and early May, we start receiving notices about hurricane preparedness, even when the skies are blue. If you don’t prepare ahead of time, or even in the week or so before a storm hits, you know you’ll find empty shelves and dry gas pumps when you drive around town. It’s hard to be ready because it requires some effort and you have plenty of other things to do.

It’s especially hard to maintain that vigilance when you don’t know when the event in question is either going to begin or come to an end. In March and April, we all scurried to find face masks, hand sanitizer, and anti-bacterial wipes. We thought the Covid-19 virus threat might last a few weeks, maybe a month or two. Now we are being advised to ramp up our Covid preparedness once again, yet no one knows for how long. “Covid fatigue” is a real thing. People are saying, “I’m just tired of it.”

Well, the bridesmaids got tired of waiting – all ten of them! It’s important to note that “As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.” (Matthew 25:5) It’s not that the five wise maidens were able to stay awake 24/7 and the five foolish maidens couldn’t keep their eyes open. All ten had shown up with their lamps, dressed, and ready to do their one job – greet the bridegroom. But when the call came in the middle of the night – “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” –

only 50% of the bridesmaids were ready. As someone has said, all ten were prepared for the event, but only five were prepared for the delay.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids is about the kingdom of heaven and the coming of the Son of Man for final judgment. If that sounds broad and overarching, well, it is. In fact, it's cosmic in scope! If you're wondering what this story has to do with you, just think about how hard it is to wait patiently in an age when everything is instant. Twenty-five years ago, we were excited to have a dial-up internet connection. Now we get impatient when we can't connect immediately and have to wait even a few seconds.

And what about the life of faith? One of the great promises of the faith is that our Lord and Savior will return one day and God's kingdom will be ushered in in all its fullness. So, Jesus begins his public ministry by saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) That sense of urgency – "right now!" – inspires Paul's letters and his instructions to the early Christians about how to live – "it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." (Romans 13:11) The book of Revelation ends with this promise and prayer, "The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" And yet, just one generation after Jesus' death and resurrection, maybe only fifty years later, there were already skeptics who asked, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." (2 Peter 3:4)

Now it's been 2,000+ years and we might wonder, "Where is the promise of his coming?" In other words, how do we keep on keepin' on in the faith? Where is the sense of urgency in our Christian lives? How do we maintain our faithfulness when the skies are blue and, especially, when the storm overwhelms us? Will we/Do we have enough oil for our lamps?

Several years ago, I read a book by Eugene Peterson called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. The title itself fits with this parable about the ten bridesmaids, half of whom were ready, half of whom were not. The subtitle of the book hints at Peterson's main idea: "Discipleship in an Instant Society." What's really interesting is that Peterson took the title of his book from a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche, an avowed atheist who pronounced "God is dead." In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote, "The essential thing 'in heaven and earth' is . . . that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living."¹

That "something which has made life worthy living" is being ready for God's future by living faithfully and actively for God in the present. That is the "oil in our lamps." Despite the popularity and wisdom of the bestselling book, *All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, that's not how it works in the life of faith. A momentary experience of Christ that is not followed by a lifetime of discipleship and nurture and growth in the faith will result in us saying, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." There are just some things that you can't borrow from somebody else, but

come from a long obedience in the same direction, things such as knowledge, faith, hope, and love. John Calvin put it this way, “There is great ingenuity over the lanterns, the vessels, the oil: the plain and natural answer is that keen enthusiasm for a short term is not enough unless accompanied by long unwearying effort . . . The parable turns on the fact the duty was not satisfied by the initial girding-up and preparation unless it was continued to the end.”

This parable is certainly about judgment and, therefore, a wake-up call. But notice that what we’re getting ready for is a big party! The five wise bridesmaids who were ready went with the bridegroom into the wedding banquet, which is a traditional symbol for the great heavenly banquet, the Messianic feast with all of God’s people! Remember when we used to get to go to parties?! Think about the excitement and the “getting ready.” Many times, the anticipation is almost as much fun as the event itself!

Jesus’ parable about being ready for the long-awaited but unexpected coming of the Son of Man is certainly serious business. But living our lives in a way that constantly replenishes the oil in our lamps not only means we’re obedient to our Lord and Savior, but also leads to a life of joy, in the meantime and on that day. In so many words, it’s what we call the “doctrine of sanctification” – or, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Philippians, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Galatians 2:12-13)

The parable of the ten bridesmaids is cosmic in scope and applicable to all believers. But it can also have a very personal meaning for each of us. Here’s how Methodist Bishop William Willimon applied this parable in a humbling and compelling way:

“When I was serving a little church in rural Georgia, one of my members had a relative who died. The funeral was in a little, hot, crowded, off-brand Baptist country church. They wheeled the coffin in; the preacher began to preach. He shouted, fumed, flayed his arms. ‘It’s too late for Joe,’ he screamed. ‘He might have wanted to do this or that in life, but it’s too late for him now. He’s dead . . . He might have wanted to straighten his life out, but he can’t now. It’s over . . . But it ain’t too late for you! So why wait? Now is the day for decision. Now is the time to make your life count for something. Give your life to Jesus!’”

Willimon called it the worst thing he had ever heard in his life. In the car he complained to his wife, Patsy: “Can you imagine a preacher doing that kind of thing to a grieving family? I’ve never heard anything so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate. I would never preach a sermon like that.” Patsy agreed, and then said, “Of course, the worst part of all is that what he said was true.”²

This parable is a word of warning and a wake-up call. But it’s also a call to a long obedience in the same direction as we navigate these in-between times, when the skies are blue and when the bottom falls out. We affirmed that way of living in our Affirmation of Faith last Sunday, from “A Brief Statement of Faith” -- In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our

daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Let us pray: Dear God, let us trust in your grace and love such that we can look to the future with confidence and share with our neighbors with generosity. In Jesus' name, Amen.

NOTES

¹Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2000), p. 13.

²William Willimon, "What Time Is It?" in *A Cloud of Witnesses*, ed. Long and Plantinga, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 108-109.