

"Anticipation and Preparation"

Ephesians 5:15-20; Matthew 25:1-13

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 28, 2015 – 5th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

A man was travelling to Europe on a tight schedule for an important meeting. An hour out of New York the pilot came on the cabin speaker. He announced that one of the plane's four engines had stopped and that it would cause the flight to be an hour longer. The man looked at his watch and started to fidget.

A little while later the pilot came on the PA once more and said that the second and third engines had gone down, and so it would extend their time by several additional hours. Now the man was practically fit to be tied as he thought about his meeting.

A half hour later the captain came on yet again and this time indicated that the fourth and last engine had stopped. "Good grief," the man complained to his seatmate, "at this rate we'll be up here all night!"

Well, I guess you could say this business man was out of touch with what was going on around him. In a way, the inability to perceive a situation is also evident in the parable in today's Gospel reading.

It's a story of ten bridesmaids. In ancient Israel a bridesmaid had a much expanded role from that of today. Jesus characterized half of these as wise, and the rest as foolish. What divides them into two groups was how well they were prepared to do their job.

Wedding celebrations in those days extended over several days. The preliminary festivities climaxed with the groom coming to fetch his bride from her home, and taking her to his. There the ceremony would be performed, and afterwards great amounts of food would be served.

As the story begins the attendants are at the bride's house and waiting to get word that the groom is on his way. One of their main duties is to escort him to where his betrothed has prepared herself, and they do this by the light of small lamps. Leading him to the house has both a practical and a symbolic aspect.

Now their small oil lamps would only burn a short time. So to ensure that the lamps wouldn't go out before the women found the groom and then brought him back to the house, it was customary for each to carry a flask of spare oil. When the lamp would flicker, additional oil would be added to its chamber.

Five of the bridesmaids had prepared themselves; the others were less prudent. Perhaps they were so busy getting ready that they just ran out of time to get an extra supply of oil. Maybe they counted on the rest being more organized and having plenty to spare. In any case, all the oil they had was already in their lamps. They had no more.

Something delays the groom from coming and it gets late. The women feel the long day catching up with them and they soon fall fast asleep. Late at night they hear shouting. The groom is on his way. So they arise and fumble around and light their lamps.

All of a sudden five of them remember they have no oil in reserve. So they beg their better prepared sisters to share some of their supply. In other words, they ask to be bailed out of this embarrassing predicament.

But those who had done what they should have say "no." It can't be done because they have only enough for themselves. If their reserves are shared, no lamp will have enough for the entire trip and all will go out. Better to have only five lamps, but lamps that will work as they're intended.

It wouldn't be surprising if those who were prepared would have been miffed at the foolish ones. They all had their chance, but some didn't make the necessary preparations. The foolish ones got themselves into this trouble; now they would have to get themselves out of it.

So the wise ones make the only possible suggestion they can think of and encourage the others to hurry and find some more oil. The foolish ones go off and do this because they really have no other choice. They've gotten themselves into this predicament.

The problem is that, by the time they get back, the groom has come and gone along with the bride and the other attendants. When the foolish ones finally get to the groom's house, they find that the door to all the festivities has been locked and they are missing out on its joys.

Elsewhere Jesus used similar comparisons. In a number of places he likened the Kingdom of God to a banquet. Where God's rule is complete and absolute, it is a time of celebration beyond compare. Now here he uses a wedding in the same way. It, too, is something everyone wants to attend. No one would want to miss out on the good time to be had. In a small village everything stops for a wedding and everyone joins in.

In our story five young women get to attend, while five others are excluded. The only thing which divides them, though it's significant, is that some were ready when the right time came and some weren't. Half of them end up in the joyous surroundings of a wedding party, while the other half are left out in the dark and cold. And so it is with the kingdom of God, Jesus said.

The early church, and perhaps even Matthew himself, may have seen something else in this parable which pertained to them. They lived with the expectation of the imminent return of Christ, yet that still had not happened in those 50 years. So some thought they saw an allegory of the return of Christ, wherein he is understood to be the bridegroom--a heavenly bridegroom.

The unexpected delay of the bridegroom is then the postponement of his return. When he does come, some will find themselves prepared and ready, but others will not. The stern rejection of the foolish maidens may be a reference to the final judgment.

Biblical scholars today, however, generally don't think such an understanding was Jesus' intention. That he told the story years earlier just so that it would make sense to a later

generation seems unlikely. No, it's more probable that Jesus meant it for those who heard him right then. But if it isn't an allegory, then what is its message?

To get at this answer we need to consider what Jesus taught as he travelled from place to place. A common emphasis is the necessity of choice. One is either with God or not. There is really no middle road. A person can't serve two masters. You can't be a little religious. Either you jump in all the way, or you may find yourself out of the pool altogether.

Jesus also taught that the time to respond is now rather than later. When the time presents itself, one must be ready to act. When the window of opportunity is past, it's gone; and there's no guarantee that it will present itself again. That, he said, is how it is with the kingdom of God. It requires our immediate attention.

Today's parable begs the question, "What does this have to do with me? What does it mean for my life?" Are these words, spoken to others 2000 years ago, intended for me as well?

This morning I see at least three things we might take from this parable. First, God provides us with times and places where the Spirit at work becomes evident in our everyday lives. Second, we have an opportunity to respond to that presence if we are aware and ready to act. Third, we have to move when the chance presents itself or else the opportunity may be lost.

This kingdom of God, Jesus said, is even now breaking into the world, though someday it will be total and complete. Meanwhile we are to be expectant and observant and ready to join in wherever, whenever we can. To be unprepared is to risk missing out on an invitation which is right at hand.

When God opens heaven to us on earth—to know it now in part, to engage where we are needed, to build on the love we have been given—we shouldn't be like the foolish bridesmaids who couldn't act on what was unfolding right before them. Be ready, Jesus says, for these occasions need a response when God offers it, and not when we want to schedule it into our busy lives.

So the party's on. The celebration's at hand. Some are going to be included and they will be filled with a gladness hard to describe. Some, unfortunately, will be left on the outside looking in. Anticipation and preparation are key factors that will determine on which side of the door you will find yourself.

When God comes calling, the wise person is the one ready to drop everything else and follow!