

A Lesson in Readiness

Matthew 25:1-13

Several years ago a group of friends and I made a trip to Israel. We spent our first night in Natanya, a seacoast town about twenty miles north of Tel Aviv. It was dark when we arrived, but everyone in our group was eager to get out and see as much as possible. The town square was well-lighted, so we all went for a walk.

As our weary group passed the large open door to a hotel lobby, we heard music and shouting. Several of us looked in to see what was happening. There was a large crowd of people at tables around the room. In the center the dance floor was filled with persons swirling and clapping. It was a wedding celebration. With a sweep of his hand a man at the door invited all of us to come in. I replied that we were merely passing by, that we had no invitation, and that the wedding families did not even know us. "That doesn't matter," he said. "This is a wedding. Come in and join us!"

While that attitude seems strange to us, it helps us understand the wedding stories in the gospels. Weddings were community events. Without sports teams, television, theaters, concerts, and leisure travel, people in ancient times gathered eagerly for religious events and for family and community celebrations.

Weddings were occasions of joy, feasting, and relaxation. The festivities often went on for days. Everyone was invited. All but essential work was suspended. Even the study of the law could be put aside for participation in a wedding.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids has several unusual features. While we do have extensive understanding of weddings customs of that period, it seems unusual that the bridegroom would arrive at midnight and that the five girls who had no oil could leave at midnight expecting a shop to be open. It appears that Matthew has taken a story that Jesus might have told and changed

the details to emphasize his message that the church must be ready at all times for cataclysmic events.

The wedding ceremony in this story was held at night. Today the focus of a wedding ceremony is the walk of the bride down the aisle. In the day of Jesus it was the arrival of the bridegroom at the home of the bride. Etiquette required that the groom and his party be met along the way by a procession including some of the bride's closest friends. Their task was to surround the groom with light as he went to meet the bride.

In this case there were ten bridesmaids waiting for the happy moment. Each of them had a lamp, a brass or clay vessel shaped very much like a little boat. The lamp could be filled with oil, lighted, and carried on a pole in the procession. The lamp would not hold much oil, so five of the girls, fearing a possible delay, had brought an extra supply. Five had not.

There was a delay, and the girls lay down and slept, their lamps by their sides. At midnight the voice of the watchman was heard: "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Quickly the girls got up and lighted their lamps. The five who had brought no spare oil said to the others, "Lend us oil. Our lamps are going out." The reply might sound unkind to us. The other girls refused, "If we do," they said, "there will not be enough for us. Go and buy your own."

As half the bridesmaids joined the wedding party, the others went to purchase oil. When they returned, they were too late for the marriage feast. The point of the story is clear. According to Matthew, Jesus told his listeners, "You must be ready, for the son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

What the parable means is not hard to determine. It is as close to an allegory as anything in the gospels. Matthew is the only gospel writer to include this story. Matthew was writing to the church to warn its members about faltering. This story tells Christians to be ready of the return of the Christ. Early believers expected Christ to return soon and bring history to a victorious climax.

Everything preceding and everything following this story carries the same message. Christ is going to return. Be ready.

However, I like to think that the lesson is broader than that. For me it carries the notion that we are constantly to be prepared for the coming of Christ into our lives. Don't miss what is really important. Christ comes, sometimes it seems, out of the blue with a call to service. Christ comes, unexpectedly, to touch us during a period of grief or uncertainty. Christ comes, in the midnight hour, to show us the way out of some dilemma. When he comes, we need to be ready to recognize him and to respond to his call.

This is a lesson in readiness and preparedness. Usually, we think of being prepared in negative terms. We think about insurance, emergency precautions, being "prepared for a rainy day." Readiness can also have a positive side. Be ready for a blessing. Don't miss the gift of life and of God's grace.

If you would like to be ready for Christ when he comes into your life, you must be aware that he comes in the here and now. Christ comes in ordinary events. There is not so much a shout that Christ is coming as a whisper that he is already here

Don't miss the truly important day by day. I think often of the comment by Emily in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Do you remember it from high school literature class? Emily died at the age of twelve. In one scene she stands on the side of the stage reflecting on her incomplete life. Family members go about their business without noticing her. She says, "Good-bye world....Good-bye to clocks ticking...and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths...and sleeping and waking up. Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you." She ends with that poignant question, "Why do we not see the beauty of living while we're living?"

We are still buzzing about last week's election, we continue to fret about the future of the economy, and we cope as best we can with personal and family concerns. Can we also see the beauty of living amid all these concerns? Can we recognize the Christ within the visible realities?

Living with meaning and purpose requires that we live with the expectation that the Christ comes and directs us toward that which is worthwhile. It also requires that we appreciate the significance of each moment. A man passing time in an airport meandered through the gift shop. He stopped to look at an item called a "personal life clock." He entered his age, gender, and a few facts about himself and pressed a button. Suddenly, through some kind of statistical computation, the clock told him how many years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds he had to live. The clock also made an unnerving sound of tick-tock. The man browsed for a while and went back to the clock. He saw that his time to live had already been reduced by ten minutes. It took days to get that idea out of his mind.

While some persons find the concept that life has a terminal point morbid and depressing, it can have a positive effect. It reminds us to live each moment and each day to the fullest. It helps to be aware that time is precious.

And, of course, you have to actually practice getting ready. Emergency teams have mock disasters in order to test preparedness. The army has military exercises. Being ready involves having a feel for the real thing. My point is that as we exercise what we know to be worthwhile, we are preparing to experience what is really important.

Some time back I discovered a book called *Learning to Fall*. I might not have paid much attention to it except that I noted that the author, Philip Simmons, had ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, and did not have long to live. The book is composed of essays Simmons wrote during his last years. They describe efforts to live meaningfully and joyfully in the face of death. As Simmons lost his ability to walk, he had to learn to fall. At first, he wrote, when

he moved about he tried to “watch his step.” The he read about mindful living and he began to tell himself to “mind his step.” The idea came from Buddhist meditation, but Simmons said that when he applied it to walking, he was aware of the feel of the earth under his feet and conscious of the blessing of standing upright. So many gifts came through being mindful of what he was doing.

But in being mindful Simmons made a discovery. He wrote that most of the time we see life as a problem to be solved. We work and play, build and transform, in order to make sense of things and to those things we think we need to do. But life is more than that. A terminal illness can make you look beyond the mundane and the ordinary. Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be explored. And one can explore that mystery no matter what his circumstances. (Pp. 7-9.)

Exploring the mystery involves thinking beyond the moment, holding a sense of holy awe toward the world and toward other people, realizing that we are never more than just on the edge of truth, living in readiness and expectation, and, above all, knowing that there is a presence within us and that that presence is the Christ.

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