

Jesus' Kind of Preparedness
by Rev. Michael R. Blackwood
United Church of Broomfield
November 12, 2023

Matthew 25:1-12 (MSG)

¹⁻⁵ "God's kingdom is like ten young virgins who took oil lamps and went out to greet the bridegroom. Five were silly and five were smart. The silly virgins took lamps, but no extra oil. The smart virgins took jars of oil to feed their lamps. The bridegroom didn't show up when they expected him, and they all fell asleep.

⁶ "In the middle of the night someone yelled out, 'He's here! The bridegroom's here! Go out and greet him!'

⁷⁻⁸ "The ten virgins got up and got their lamps ready. The silly virgins said to the smart ones, 'Our lamps are going out; lend us some of your oil.'

⁹ "They answered, 'There might not be enough to go around; go buy your own.'

¹⁰ "They did, but while they were out buying oil, the bridegroom arrived. When everyone who was there to greet him had gone into the wedding feast, the door was locked.

¹¹ "Much later, the other virgins, the silly ones, showed up and knocked on the door, saying, 'Master, we're here. Let us in.'

¹² "He answered, 'Do I know you? I don't think I know you.'

¹³ "So stay alert. You have no idea when he might arrive.

Be Prepared.

It's the motto of the Scouts of America. Founder of the Boy Scouts, Robert-Baden-Powell indicated in his 1908 manual that "to be prepared meant 'you are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty.'" Good, sage advice.

In general, do you feel prepared? *Always in a state of readiness?* I'm sure most of you would probably say, "well...yeah, I think so." If we're talking about generalities, then yes. But if we're talking about very specific situations, you may have more confidence in your response.

- I AM prepared for my chemistry test because I've studied quite a lot.
- I am NOT prepared to administer CPR to someone in an emergency because I haven't taken a class.
- I am NOT prepared to see my loved-one die. I just can't handle it.

BUT...

What happens when you think you're prepared, and all goes wrong? Or when unanticipated circumstances of life come into play?

When it comes to preparedness, there are people who are boy scouts-always at the ready, then there are the "oblivious and foolish" who try, but sometimes have a narrow focus when planning and may forget things or

not anticipate enough, and then there are people who are simply disengaged, resistant or stubborn – they'll do what they want, when they want, and no one is going to tell them otherwise. We tend to fall into one of these categories, but depending upon the situation, we tend to adjust accordingly.

Handling the unanticipated circumstances of life often depends on how we choose to respond. Can we see or find creative or positive options when it seems that things have gone wrong?

- No, I'm NOT prepared for my chemistry test, but I'm going to do my best anyway. And next time, I will be ready.
- Yes, I AM prepared to administer CPR because last time I couldn't and I decided not to be in that situation again, so I took a class.
- I was NOT prepared for my loved one's passing, but in our final conversations I heard wonderful stories that I had never known. I was more prepared than I thought.

When we think about this parable contextually, the wedding and the banquet was a big "to-do" in the town and everyone was a part of it, ready to escort the bride and her family from her home to the home of the bridegroom, when he arrived, so that the wedding and feast could begin. The reality is that the ten young virgins, the bridesmaids invited to the celebration, were likely young girls, maybe 12 or 13 years old.

What's the likelihood that a group of 5-6 young pre-teen girls, excited about their dresses, the role they get to play and the forthcoming party, might forget something? Or not be thinking about "what-ifs?"

Think about it - it's not like the five girls **forgot** to bring oil-filled lamps, they just didn't bring **extra** oil. They weren't thinking, "what if the oil runs out?" Who did they hurt by forgetting the extra oil? Nothing in this specific story suggests that it was customary or part of this specific wedding invitation that they were advised to bring extra oil, just in case. The expectation for the bridesmaids was that the bridegroom would be on time, so bringing a lamp with oil would indicate that they assessed the situation and their responsibilities accordingly.... until the bridegroom unexpectedly didn't show up.

And...why did the five "wise bridesmaids" feel the need to bring the extra oil? How often do you drive around with a spare 5-gallon container of gas in the back of your car [just in case]? Probably not often, unless (1) your job or daily life requires it or (2) you're *expecting* a worst-case scenario, like a natural disaster - a blizzard is predicted or something.

How much time do we spend thinking of or planning for what could **possibly** go wrong? "What if this...or what if that...?" There is a time and place for preparation, but at the same time it happens to so many that they spend so much time being preoccupied about what "could go wrong," that they don't enjoy life or even notice what "is going right," or even what's happening at all.

Did the bridesmaids really have to be excluded from the banquet for their transgression? Was it really so bad? Does the consequence fit the action? I mean, it was a wedding celebration that the young girls were attending, not a tax audit after all.

Then I want us to not forget something else about those "wise" bridesmaids. Yes, they were smart. Their planning paid off. I want to be like them, ready for anything, just in case. But, when the foolish bridesmaids said to them, "oh no, we've run out of oil, would you mind sharing," what was their response? Nope. Sorry. If we share with you then we may run out and we're not missing out.

Their response sounds like greedy children refusing to share their toy, not like Christians, trying to live **the way**. Being smart and prepared doesn't mean we get to be greedy and unkind. If we truly understand Jesus' teachings and God's reign, we know that the pie isn't finite with only so many pieces. No. There is enough pie for everyone. We share and give of ourselves because that is the Kin-dom of God – abundance, plenty for all, right here, right now. I'm going to share because I have faith that it will be enough, that 5 loaves and 2 fish will feed thousands of people and that a day's worth of oil can and will last for eight nights. Sure, you can have some of our oil.

There are consequences.

When you're told to be prepared and you're not, well...what do you expect? When you know that being prepared yields the best outcomes, you prepare. And if you don't then it should be no surprise if something goes awry.

From a Christian perspective, I dislike that there are far too many preachers who use fear tactics to ensure obedience and "appropriate behavior"; you'd better do this or say that because if you don't then there will be literal hell to pay. That's often how this parable is preached, but that is not what I want us to take from this parable.

Yes, we do take heed of God's warnings to be prepared. In choosing to follow the way of Christ, we know that he will return. Our scriptures tell us, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only [God]...Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (Matt 24:36 and 44).

We know that while this is "just" a parable, it isn't. It is a parable about something very significant and important; eternal salvation and God's reign.

Don't want to study for that chemistry test, fine. Don't want to take a CPR class, ok. But this is life we're talking about - earthly and eternal. So, if you're going to NOT want to get caught with your pants down on something, it's this!

So...we do take this seriously. We understand the importance of what we are responsible to do – to be prepared and make good and timely decisions when it concerns living a life according to Christ's teachings.

AND...we also know that our God – serious as God can be – is also a gracious, merciful and loving God. This earthly life and our eternal lives are about love and flourishing, which God wants us to live well. That's what the Kin-dom of God is – flourishing & living well. That's what this parable is about - living well now and eternally. Jesus teaches us how to do it. Jesus tells us to be prepared. So , don't miss out on opportunities or let a door close in your face.

I wish that the bridesmaids would have been more creative. Why didn't any of them suggest that they walk in in pairs – each pair holding a lit lamp between them. Ten bridesmaids with five lamps – would that not have been allowed? It even sounds quite beautiful when you think about their entrance into the banquet.

I wish that the foolish bridesmaids would have had more faith in the bridegroom. I wish that they wouldn't have bought into the negative depiction of the bridegroom or the circumstances which suggested that unless you entered the banquet with a lit oil lamp, the bridegroom wouldn't admit you. Had they processed in with an unlit lamp, would the bridegroom have stopped them? "I'm sorry your lamp isn't lit, so you can't come to the party?" "I'm sorry, your light has gone out, so let me snuff out your joy even more?" If those were the standard rules of the party, wasn't Jesus all about challenging conventional wisdom? Had they processed in with the other bridesmaids, having unlit lamps, I think that Jesus would have let them in.

This is the way God wants it to be in the Kingdom. God wants everyone to be invited. God wants everyone present and accounted for, and God wants us to be as giddy as teenagers at a party! For God looked upon creation and declared it to be good!

The only one who can exclude you from the party is you, so don't do it. Be prepared.

And...have faith should the unexpected happen.

And...be considerate of others and share if given the opportunity.

AMEN