

Trim the Hearth, Set the Table

Luke 2:6-7

Matthew 25:1-13

November 29, 2009

There's a supposedly true story that comes from the sinking of the Titanic. A frightened woman found her place in a lifeboat that was about to be lowered into the raging 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 or they would leave without her.

She ran across the deck that was already slanted at a dangerous angle. She raced to her stateroom and quickly pushed aside her diamond rings and expensive bracelets and necklaces as she reached to the shelf above her bed and grabbed three small oranges. Then, she quickly found her way back to the lifeboat and got in.

Now, that seems incredible because thirty minutes earlier she would not have chosen a crate of oranges over the smallest diamond. But death had boarded the Titanic. One blast of its awful breath had transformed her values. Instantaneously, priceless things had become worthless. Worthless things had become priceless. And in that moment she preferred three small oranges to a crate of diamonds. The woman on the sinking Titanic understood, in the light of her current circumstances, that she must make preparations for living on a lifeboat. Diamonds would not suffice, only the precious resources of an orange were good enough.

There are events in life, which have the power to transform the way we look at the world. Jesus' parable about the ten virgins offers one of these types of events, for the parable is about the Second Coming of Christ. But Jesus doesn't come right out and say this. Rather, he lets the story describe it for him. Likewise, in this world where Christ may return at any moment, the parable warns, we must be ready.

In the passage from Matthew, Jesus tells a parable about a wedding. It's told not from the vantage point of the bride and groom, but of the ten young maidens who had been invited to the happy occasion – five of them were foolish, five of them were wise. What was the measure of their wisdom? It was their readiness to be a part of the big event.

This is, of course, foreign to our concept of weddings today. Weddings in our society are announced for a specific time and place. But in first century Palestine, a wedding could happen anytime within several days. The uncertainty was considered a 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 just before the big event a messenger was sent through the streets shouting: Behold the bridegroom cometh." The alert ones in the wedding party would

respond, and the others would be left behind.

In Jesus parable, the cry came at midnight. 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 other bridesmaids. But the others responded, "If we give you our oil, there won't be enough for us. Hurry out to the dealers and buy some yourself." So the five foolish maidens hurried out, but by the time they returned the door had already been closed. They knocked on the door and pleaded to be a part of the festivities, but the groom said: "If you belonged at this event you would already have been present." Jesus concluded: Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

What is this parable communicating to us? I would like to make a few suggestions.

First, it is saying some things in life cannot be borrowed. You and I cannot live on someone else's oil. We can help one another in so many ways, but in some things we are on our own.

This is especially true when it comes to a relationship with Jesus Christ. The road of the religious pilgrimage is a narrow one and can only be walked two at a time, you and God. Your parents cannot walk it for you or with you. Husbands cannot depend upon the devotion of their wives. I have had more than one husband laughingly say to me over the years: "My wife handles the religion in our family. What they really reveal, however, is how little they understand about faith.

Faith is the most intensely personal experience we will ever have in life. Others can help us toward it. They can encourage us. They can pray for us. They can bring us up in the way we should go, but in the end, we must embrace faith in Christ ourselves. No one can do that for us. The five foolish maidens in this story were foolish because they thought that they could rely upon the resources of others to get them through. What they discovered was that there are some things in life that cannot be borrowed.

Secondly, I think that the parable suggests that there are some things that cannot be put off until the last moment. I have known people who thought they could skip class and not study on a daily basis. Then when an exam came, they thought they were going to be able to cram two months of a subject into their heads. They end up flunking the exam. If you have ever been in that sad situation, you understand that there are some things that simply cannot be put off.

It is amazing to me how many of us fail to grasp this concept when it comes to life's decisions. How many couples have I seen over the years who never bothered to darken the doorstep of a church. Then the marital problems come and they are panicked, and they rush to the church because they see religion as the last fling before the divorce. And then they wonder why religion

failed them when it doesn't work. *My friends, you cannot make withdrawals until and unless you have first made some deposits.* There are some things that cannot be put off until the last moment.

Why is it that we so often put life's important decisions off until the last moment? Jesus said that it is because we are foolish. It is the foolish person who cannot see down the long road. It is not that the foolish maidens lacked any desire. They genuinely wanted to go and participate in the celebration. It is just that they did not see it as a priority. 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 end.

Third, the parable suggests to us that, if we are not prepared, we can miss our great opportunities. The issue here is one of readiness when Christ returns. When God holds his grand celebration, will we be ready?

During Advent, we love to focus on remembering the birth of the Christ-child. It is a miracle of love that we should not ignore. It is also one that is easy for us because such a remembrance can be done in a fairly passive way from our standpoint. But there are two other aspects to Advent that are a little more challenging to us – the coming of Christ into our own hearts and His second-coming. These require a response from us – they require action.

As we think about those second two aspects of Advent in light of this parable, we need to understand something that doesn't seem very Christmas-like; there is an element of judgment to this parable. When the foolish maidens arrived at the party, we are told: "The door was shut." When I read these words I cannot help but think of the story of Noah and how he gathered his family into the ark. When the great flood came there were many who surely pounded on the door and begged to be let in, but the scripture says: "The door was shut."

These are metaphors for God's judgment. They remind us that the door that God shuts, no man opens. George Wallace, who passed away a few years ago, now openly admitted that when he stood at the door of the University of Alabama and denied entrance to blacks that he was wrong. He even openly apologized for that action. I affirm that change of mind in him. Yet, the truth of the matter is that when his great moment in history came, his heart was not prepared and he missed his great opportunity.

Jesus is telling us in this simple parable about the tragedy of the unprepared life. Jesus said that we are at all times to be prepared, for no man knows the hour. My friend, the best way to get ready for tomorrow, is to be ready today. A time will come when no further preparation is possible.

I had someone in a former congregation undergo surgery. When I visited her she said to me:

Pastor, if everything turns out all right, that's ok. If everything does not turn out alright, well, that's ok too." She was speaking in the language of the five wise maidens. She is prepared to live; she is prepared to die.

And behold, all of the maidens slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry: Behold the bridegroom. Come and meet him." Those maidens who were prepared Jesus called wise. I hope he will be able to say that of all of us this Advent.