

Matthew 25:1-13
World English Bible translation

25 “Then the Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ Those who were foolish, when they took their lamps, took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. ⁵ Now while the bridegroom delayed, they all slumbered and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Behold! The bridegroom is coming! Come out to meet him!’ ⁷ Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps.^[a] ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the wise answered, saying, ‘What if there isn’t enough for us and you? You go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ While they went away to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast, and the door was shut. ¹¹ Afterward the other virgins also came, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he answered, ‘Most certainly I tell you, I don’t know you.’ ¹³ Watch therefore, for you don’t know the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.

Wisdom and Folly

Mike

I was in the Boy Scouts when I was a kid. The Boy Scout motto is “Be Prepared.” I learned how to tie knots and pitch a tent and to have everything I needed for a camping trip in my backpack. I also learned some first aid and other practical skills. But the best lesson I got happened one afternoon outside the church parish house where we had our Scout meetings. The sidewalk along that stretch of Ascan Avenue was very uneven, having been heaved up by tree roots and winter frost. I didn’t see him fall, but I heard people crying out that someone was hurt and I saw the old man lying on the sidewalk with blood pouring from his nose. The people nearby hadn’t done anything to help the old man yet. They were standing around, not knowing what to do. I heard someone say, “get Mike,” and a moment later I saw the crowd part and Mike appeared.

Mike Peligatto was our scout leader. He was a mechanic by trade. He was a tall, wiry guy with short black hair and a face that was creased and weather beaten as a desert canyon. He had only eight full fingers and if you asked what happened to the missing ones, he would only say that he got into a fight with a wall and the wall won. Mike chain smoked Marlboro cigarettes and cussed like a sailor, but he was fair and tough and expected a lot from us and he treated us kids like we mattered. He had our undying respect and admiration.

As the crowd parted, Mike walked towards the scene of the accident, where the old man had fallen and was lying there bleeding. As he was walking, he removed his

sweater and his white tee-shirt. He looked at someone and told them to call 9-1-1. He knelt by the old man and applied direct pressure to his nose with his tee-shirt and checked if he had any other injuries. Then he told someone else to get a blanket and something to put under the man's head. A short while later, the ambulance pulled up and the old man was attended to by paramedics.

I'll never forget that day, because Mike showed us what it meant to be prepared. Seeing him calmly and decisively take action at a critical moment taught more to me and my friends than any lecture about being prepared ever did. More important than having a first aid kit, he had his wits about him, his knowledge of first aid and calming presence which he used to help a neighbor in need.

Matthew

The story in the Gospel today is about being prepared. It tells of ten young women who are waiting for a bridegroom to arrive so they can enter a wedding feast. Weddings in those days were a big affair. They were not only highlights for those who were betrothed, but the entire community would get together for an extended celebration. There were no other occasions as fun and special as a wedding. These events were planned and highly anticipated, but it was normal for a bridegroom to appear at an unexpected hour since he had many visits to make on his way to the feast. The maidens with the lamps would have known about the wedding for some time and had a chance to be ready for the delay of the bridegroom. The young ladies with extra oil were prepared for a long wait, while the young ladies without extra oil were unprepared, but not without warning.

It is a tough image that Jesus presents in some ways, because, we think of Jesus' message as being inclusive and loving, not locking anyone out of the kingdom, as this parable suggests of the five foolish maidens who were not prepared. We might hope and expect Jesus to be more forgiving. But the idea is that whether it is the surprise appearance of the bridegroom or an unexpected medical emergency, if you are not prepared when the moments strikes, then it is too late. You do not want to be caught unprepared.

Wise and Foolish Ways

The story of the wise and foolish young women is not just a parable about being prepared and planning ahead, but about ways of being. The way of wisdom is equated in other parts of the Bible as the way of life. The way of foolishness is equated with the way of death. There are many passages in the Bible devoted to the question of wisdom and folly.

In the The Wisdom of Solomon, which appears in some versions of the Bible, the writer gives wisdom a female character and says, ¹⁷ **The beginning of wisdom is the**

most sincere desire for instruction... ²⁰ so the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom.”

The book of Proverbs has a lot to say about wisdom.

Proverbs 1:7 “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

Proverbs 4:7 “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.”

Proverbs 7:4 “Say unto wisdom, Thou art my sister...”

Proverbs 8:11 “For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it.”

Why is so much written about wisdom?

The subject of wisdom is prominent in the New Testament as well. In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 7, Jesus concludes his Sermon On The Mount by saying, ²⁴ “Everyone, then, who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!” (Matt: 7:24-27)

This brings us to the question of end times. Matthew 24-25 is the last discourse offered by Jesus before the Passover and the culmination of his journey to the cross. These chapters tell of the end times. They are very much about being watchful and prepared. Preparedness is also a theme of Advent as we approach a time when we watch for the light entering the world.

Preparedness

Disaster scenarios and survival is one of the obsessions of our culture, perhaps because we sense that our peace and stability are fragile, perhaps because, even if we have not experienced tragedy ourselves, we know people who have and we see people struggling with disasters on the news. While it may be possible to go overboard with the “prepper” mindset, which is often characterized by fear and lack, it is worth noting that there are positive aspects to it. It is wise to look ahead and plan for the future. Disasters can come in regional or individual sizes. If you get a flat tire on a remote road on the mountain during a snowstorm where there is no cell reception, then being wisely prepared could be the difference between a mishap and a disaster.

How do we prepare wisely for unforeseen events? There are many ways to do this.

Circles of Preparedness

If we consider wisdom as a sense of being prepared, in a loving, intelligent and discerning way, then we can consider how to be prepared, and in that sense, wise.

If we want to be physically prepared, we take care of our bodies through exercise and getting enough sleep. We have to manage our stress levels and make our living environments healthy places to be. We have to pay attention to what we eat and put into our bodies for nutrition. These are important elements to physical health and preparedness.

To be mentally prepared for things, we might want to know some basic first aid. (I can host a class with an EMT here if anyone is interested). You might want to memorize some phone numbers of emergency contacts (and have one on file here at church in case of an emergency). You might want to have a plan in case of snow storms and power outages and work things out with family friends and neighbors that you can check on one another. These are wise things to do to prepare ahead of time.

There are circles of preparation that we could go on about, the personal, familial, financial, communal aspects of the matter, but that is more than we perhaps ought to talk about this morning. But there is one thing that is actually more important than all the other preparations combined. That is the one that Matthew talks about in The Sermon On The Mount and in the story we heard today. It is the preparation that has us building our house on the rock, that has us carry extra oil for our lamps. It is the preparation that has us following the way of Jesus.

The world may say it is a foolish pursuit. The world will say it is more important to have a six month supply of canned goods in your basement, or a two year supply of cash in your mattress, or a fall-out shelter in your backyard. But to the world, it is only matter that matters. We come here to seek the spirit. Jesus said, **“seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you.”** (Lk, 12:31) Seek God, and everything else that you need will be provided. That is the path of wisdom. That is the path of life.

As a boy, I saw in my scout leader Mike a model of preparedness and cool confidence during an emergency. This was an important thing to witness. But as a man, I bear witness that Christ taught and healed and faced death on a cross so that we may have life in abundance.

It seems to me that wisdom is not a destination but a pursuit. It is a relationship with seeking neither facts or knowledge, but a blending of intelligence and love, with divine truth. It is about developing good judgement and common sense and discernment and not persisting in whatever foolish ways we may be pursuing.

We all have a model to follow in Jesus. Following Christ with all our hearts is the wise preparation that is the foundation of our lives.