

**First Church of Christ Longmeadow**  
**Sermon preached by Ute Schmidt on Sunday, November 9, 2008**

**Companions in Christ,**

Be prepared! – The slogan of the Boy and Girl Scouts comes to mind when listening to the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. And there is wisdom to that slogan as most of us know whether we joined the scouts when we were younger or not. To have your emergency tools like a Swiss army knife in your pocket, enough food in the house, appropriate clothing for any unexpected change in weather makes a lot of sense ...that's about the external preparation of things, there is another preparation that is more about matters of the mind and the heart....

Whenever I enter a hospital room to visit a person that I have never met before, I have a sense of anticipation and alertness “will I be able to connect with this person? What if she asks me questions that I cannot answer? Am I prepared enough to meet this person on a meaningful level? Will we find a way to let God speak to us?” do I have enough oil in my lamp to meet the other where she is?”

Many years ago when I was a younger chaplain serving in a Lutheran hospital in Germany, I was called to visit with a woman in her seventies recovering from surgery. The nurses had determined that she needed to talk. So I was called. I stood next to her bed, introduced myself, and was ready to have a pleasant pastoral visit with this nice, friendly looking woman. Well, so much for being prepared... as soon as I opened my mouth she began a tirade about God and the church. She was quite angry with God and told me so. How could God have taken her husband, now her health, and the last pastor she had wasn't of any help either, no, she didn't believe in all of this anymore...there was hardly any time for me to respond to anything... I was stunned, felt utterly unprepared to comfort this woman and my escape was - I had learned that in my clinical pastoral education course – to let her vent and to simply accept her feelings and nod. It didn't take long, and she told me that she was done, exhausted and needed to take nap. I extended a blessing and best wishes to her, exhausted myself, ready for a cup of coffee. A few days later, the nurse called again, telling me that the patient wanted to see me again. That indeed took me by surprise. This time, I prepared myself with prayer, sharing my anxiety with my colleague and carrying the bible with me – just in case. Now I felt prepared – somehow. I entered the room and a well groomed, smiling lady greeted me with apologizing: “ I am so sorry for my misbehavior the other day. I shouldn't have been so nasty to you, but thank you for your patience>.... And I was stunned again and it took me a moment to get over my surprise. I smiled back, thanked her and then my curiosity took over, I wanted to know what had happened to her.... And we talked for another half an hour.

I did not need my bible, my prayer book, all I needed in both instances was an open heart and a willingness to listen to whatever she had to tell me. Being present to her in the moment was all that was needed. Paying attention to her. The patient filled my lamp with oil in those moments.

My experiences as chaplain, of course, remain limited in light of the complexity of Jesus teachings in the parable. However, there are experiences and events in life, which have the power to transform the way we look at the world. Jesus parable about the Ten bridesmaids offers one of these types of events, for the parable is about the Second Coming of Christ which was an important belief to the early Christians. The Second Coming of Christ may be more of challenging notion for Christians today. A belief that is not as popular as it was way back then. However, we have to ask ourselves what do we expect of our faith? How do we expect to encounter Jesus today? How can we understand the second coming of Christ today?

The writer of the Gospel of Matthew focused on the inner preparation for the kingdom of God and for the second coming of Jesus. To be spiritually prepared was as a way of being equipped to manage the differences in opinions about faith at the time, and to welcome the returning of Christ.

Jesus' parable about the wedding as a metaphor for the kingdom of God, is told not from the vantage point of the bride and groom, but of the ten young bridesmaids who had been invited to the happy occasion, five of them were foolish says the parable, five of them were wise. What was the measure of their wisdom? They were ready for the event. All of the young women had oil in their lamps, but five had an additional supply – they were prepared for the unexpected, the unpredictable...

This is a foreign notion to our well planned weddings today. We book a wedding planner who takes care of all the details especially the time, the location and the day!! And if things are late in getting started, those invited guests begin to complain a bit. 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. Just before the coming of the bridegroom a messenger was sent to announce his arrival: "Behold the bridegroom is coming!" The alert ones in the wedding party would respond, and the others would be left behind.

In Jesus parable, the announcement came at midnight. This was not unusual. 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 they 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 women hurried out, but by the time they returned the door had already been closed. They knocked and pleaded to be part of the festivities, but the groom said: "If you belonged to this celebration you would already have been present." Jesus concluded: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

There are at least three things to consider thinking about:

- Some things cannot be borrowed
- Some things cannot be put off.
- We can miss out on great opportunities.

### **1. Some things cannot be borrowed:**

the parable talks about faith, it is not about the supply in oil that we need to warm our houses or lit our darkness. It is not about going out to buy something that will get us in the door. No, with this parable Jesus is teaching us about faith. It is the question of how have we developed and grown in our faith over time? Are we ready to tap into our supply of faith that sustains us in unexpected situations? Faith is something we cannot borrow from our neighbor. Hopefully we can talk with someone in our life about our faith life, our relationship with God and our church community, and hopefully we have a prayer life that is meaningful to us at any time. We can borrow thoughts and ideas from a book, a sermon, a friend or a famous thinker, but in the end, we have to ask ourselves if those borrowed thoughts can really sustain us in the long run and what do they actually mean for our lives. If we are honest with ourselves, we will know deep down in our heart that we need to do our homework in faith, being in touch with our tradition, being diligent in a spiritual practice that connects us with God, our community and our inner self. God is speaking to us individually and to us as a community through this parable, asking us to pay attention to our spiritual life and to be intentional about our practice of praying, worship and reflecting on our faith.

### **2. Some things cannot be put off:**

well, birthing a child and death are probably the two existential things that cannot be put off – as much as medical technology wants us to believe that – in the end, they need to happen. That is part of the human condition – and paying taxes....

Living a meaningful and faithful life can be put off, but the cost can be high. Putting off our relationship with God, with a church community or with a spiritual practice may look reasonable in the moment when things are going well for us – it is often in a crisis that people who haven't practiced spirituality – that people feel lost. There can be a time in life, when it may be too late to try to connect with a faith that would make sense. God will be always there for us. The question is: will we be there for God to enter our lives at a time when we need it more than any other time?

My patient from many years ago, although she was so angry, she didn't put off sharing her anger with me, it needed to be done right there and she was relieved afterwards. It was an expression of her faith, she hadn't given up on God, she needed a companion to listen to her lament. Her lament became a transforming power that helped her to reconcile with the past and to move on, her faith changed through the lament, through not putting it off, but taking a risk. Five Bridesmaids were prepared for the unexpected, the other five bridesmaids put off their preparation. The door remained closed.

Not putting things of faith off, fundamentally means to stay awake and to be attentive to the voice of God speaking to us, to the needs of our soul to connect with one another and with God, to serve others in need and to pray. It is about the right amount of preparation, not too much and not too less. Henry David Thoreau said, "Now or never! You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find eternity in the moment!"

### 3. **We can miss out on great opportunities:**

The five bridesmaids with no oil left, missed a great celebration. They missed being with the bridegroom. It is like Christmas without Jesus. It is Easter without the resurrection. Pentecost without the Holy Spirit. Many people these days miss out.

The five bridesmaids with no oil represent to the early Christians a warning to stay alert and to pay attention to the second coming of Christ that could happen any minute. For us, this may mean, to be prepared in our spiritual life, in our faith to be ready for the meeting with Jesus that can occur any time. The five bridesmaids may have procrastinated in getting enough oil on time. In matters of faith this may mean, that we feel overconfident that our lack of spiritual practice will do at any time, that focusing on our worries will not interfere with our trust in God, that our tendency to put things off that are uncomfortable or need an extra effort may have no impact on our spiritual lives, that neglecting our yearning for a spiritual life but attending always to the needs of others may not impact our relationships and our spiritual life – all this may mean that we will miss out on an opportunity to experience the fulfillment, joy and inner peace of a faith that is awake, active and alive in the moment. We may miss out on the wedding feast as the greatest celebration of being in community with Christ.

All along in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is talking about the art of living in the moment, of being attentive to the presence of God in the here and now. The parables, the sermon on the Mount and the conversations with the disciples point to this spiritual practice of being in the moment. Jesus alerts the disciples to the importance of staying awake – even up until the very last moments of his life in the Garden Gethsemane.

The theme of staying awake is like a red thread throughout the Gospel of Matthew. It is the invitation to paying attention to what is happening now: “Attention is the intention to live without reservation in the here and now.” – says the psychologist Timothy Miller. I think it makes a lot of sense for our spiritual life when we begin in the here and now, like focusing on the core of our beliefs: to love our God, and our neighbor as ourselves, because “no moment is trivial since each one contains a divine kingdom and heavenly sustenance”, according to Jean Pierre de Caussade, a Jesuit spiritual director from the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In Matthew 6: 33-34, it is written: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” I hear this as an invitation to pay attention to the here and now. It is not a denial of trouble. Jesus puts the priorities into perspective. The worries will be there, yes, you might as well prepare yourself now to manage them by tapping into your relationship with God now. Eduard Schweizer puts it this way: “When Jesus calls on his disciples to keep watch, he is calling on them to take the reality of God so seriously that they can come to terms with its sudden appearance at any moment within their own lives, precisely because they know that this reality will one day come unboundedly in the kingdom of God.”

Or, let us remember the last verse from our parable as a slogan for the rest of our day: “ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”  
Amen.