

**Long-Range Planning
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Matthew 25: 1-13**

I wonder if Jesus ever officiated at a wedding. They called him “Rabbi.” Was He certified to be an officiant? Because He tells a lot of wedding stories.

Most pastors could regale you with wedding stories. Like the time the groom didn’t try on the tux pants until he was at the church, and discovered 30 minutes before the wedding they sent a 32 waist instead of a 42 – and try as he might – (it was fun watching him try) – there was no way he was going to fit in those. He ended up with a groomsman’s trousers, and the groomsman wore blue jeans.

I tell brides and grooms at the wedding rehearsal that something WILL go wrong. Always does. Even those weddings which appear to be going smoothly probably aren’t. Somewhere in the background, some disaster is unfolding, and I just want brides and grooms to be prepared – something will go wrong.

Of course I never think about the fact that this truth also includes me. I had a wedding in July a few years ago. An outside wedding – which, let me just say from the beginning, at least to me, an outside wedding seems the perfect invitation to disaster. I’m just sayin’.... But that’s another sermon!

Anyway, it was July. I knew from the rehearsal that I – and I alone would be staring into the sun – everyone else was facing me. Well....I sunburn. Within seconds. So the wedding day I put a little #50 sunscreen on my forehead, cheeks and nose before I left the house for the venue. I thought to myself, “I’ll be good to go and won’t be red as a beet by the time the wedding is over.”

Once there, everything was going according to plan. I led the groomsmen out and took my place, staring into the afternoon sun. What I hadn’t noted was the temperature that day was going to be about 10 degrees warmer than the rehearsal the day before, and the humidity about 1,000% higher. And.....I would be wearing my robe. My BLACK robe.

By the time the first bridesmaid was down the aisle, sweat was running down the back of my legs. As the bride arrived on her father’s arm, the sweat on my forehead had trickled into my eyes, co-mingled with the #50 sunscreen, which proceeded to burn like jalapeño juice in my eyes. My eyes watered and soon tears were streaming down my cheeks.

The hard-of-hearing grandmother in the front row “whispered” – in a voice everyone could hear, “Oh look at the pastor – even HE is crying!”

So – Jesus tells us about a wedding. And things don’t go as planned. The bridegroom is delayed. Stuff happens.

Which may be the whole point of this story. By the time Matthew wrote down this parable in his Gospel, the Christian community may have been waiting for Jesus' return for fifty years or more. Most of the eye-witnesses to Jesus were dead. The church had spread, but it had also been persecuted. The Temple revered by both the Jews who loved and confessed Jesus and those who did not, had been destroyed, wreaking havoc on Jewish and Christian communities to see that Temple torn down. Where was Jesus?¹ Didn't He say He would be back? Like the bridegroom, obviously he has been delayed.

Of course, should anyone have been surprised THIS bridegroom was delayed? They should have known. Jesus was never on a timetable when He was here. He stopped along the way; people called out to Him from the side of the road, "Son of David" and He would go over and have a chat with them, heal them, teach them. He got diverted, or needed a break and went off to pray. He preached so long one time that it got to be dinnertime. Were they naïve about his return, especially when he told them no one would know the day or hour?

Sometimes things just don't go as we think they should. We should know that.

Now – let's face it. You and I can't prepare for every eventuality. If you and I imagined, tried to prepare for, took every precaution, considered every eventuality and constructed our world to meet every uncertainty – why, we'd never walk out the front door. We would be paralyzed. We would never do anything.

BUT – you and I CAN prepare for those things we KNOW are going to happen – eventually.

I have a 30' tape measure in my office. In my "magic drawer" – the drawer that has shoe polish and mouthwash and hand cleanser and Band-Aids and a handheld mirror and a lint roller and a toothbrush and a screwdriver and pliers – and yes – a 30' tape measure. I've learned over the years there are things I'm going to need – again and again and again. Everyone on the staff knows I have a tape measure.

I always keep two things in my backpack and my car. Always. Tums. And Altoids. You learn over time there are things you can anticipate needing. You never know when – but you know you will – and when you need them – you want them nearby.

I'm amazed by folks who don't have a will. If you own anything beyond a bicycle, and don't have a will, what's wrong with you? The bridesmaids know one thing for sure – eventually the bridegroom is coming. So is your final day. If you have property, a bank account – for heaven's sake if you have more than one sibling, or a spouse, or children – and don't have a will – where's your head?

You and I cannot foresee nor prepare for all eventualities, but THAT is one we ALL know is coming; as certain as it can be. It's why I keep telling people they should draft an obituary. Do you really want to risk letting other people write that. If you do, you get to leave off some things that you don't want said! Pick a couple hymns for your funeral. Talk about what you want done with your body. Do some people really think that day is never going to come???

So the first lesson in this story – prepare for the things you know are coming. Make yourself ready for what you KNOW is coming.

The other point of this story is to prepare for the possibilities you cannot imagine. Expect the unexpected. All the bridesmaids were prepared for the bridegroom. They all had lamps. They all had oil. At least some. They were so confident of that, that they all even went to sleep while they were waiting. But for some reason, some of them couldn't imagine a delay (they obviously didn't live near Route 202!). It just never crossed their mind things wouldn't go as planned.

So it seems with us. Childbirth goes awry. Marriages fail. People cross the median and run head on into others. Genetics happens to work against you; your body rebels and cells do things they shouldn't.

It happens. All the time. Thankfully, not the majority of the time to the majority of the people – but enough that you and I – surprised as we may be when it happens to us or someone we love – should not be completely taken aback. Stuff happens. To friends. And neighbors. And family.

And being prepared for those unexpected possibilities that we can't anticipate is much more INTERNAL, than having a tape measure or a will. We can never foresee or prepare for all contingencies – but we can have hearts and minds ready – filled with the oil of faith to uphold us.

That's when the classic interpretation of this parable strikes home – the understanding that it is too late to begin prepping for an examination the day of the test. When Jesus comes or calls you and I need to be ready.

And while the 5 maidens who had extra oil wouldn't share with others seems selfish, most folks understand the context. In a literal sense in the story, they did not know how much oil they would need; they don't know how long the parade is going to take. If they shared some, they might not be able to light the way all the way to the end of the parade.

But if this is allegory – and the oil represents faith; a personal relationship with God; a life of discipleship; spiritual depth – then most interpreters understand those are not things that can be shared. They are not commodities to be passed on like oil.

You can't borrow spiritual preparedness. In fact, I remember preaching once and asking, "Can someone who has benefitted from long years of daily prayer, intentional bible reading and regular worship instantly transfer the riches received by that to someone who has been recklessly delinquent about their relationship with God?? The obvious answer in that sermon was "NO!"

Again, I've preached "How critical it is for us to accumulate enough spiritual reserves. For when it comes to be your time – of death; of crisis; of opportunity – what will you have to show for it? Will there be the internal foundation – like the wise man who built a house on the rock; like the wise bridesmaids who had plenty of oil to light the way – or will we be like those who have no resources upon which to call? No well from which to draw good water? No faith reserves to bolster us when the storms come crashing?

That's a really straight up approach to this text.

But I've had a slightly different thought this week. In the story, you don't share the oil because the supply is limited. But is that true of faith?

For instance, our entire Stephen Ministry program here is based on the idea of someone whose flask is more full, coming alongside someone whose light is barely flickering, and sharing some encouragement.

The five who got locked out in the story got locked out because they weren't there when the door was closed. They had run off to try to find resources on their own. If your lamp is running low; and you don't have anything to spare, don't run away. Throw yourself on the mercy of folks whose flasks are full. Grab hold of someone whose life seems well-oiled.

And if you're filled up, if you've got an abundance of the knowledge of God's love and grace and mercy and comfort – share some of what you've got. Sometimes you and I don't have a clue that someone near us is running on empty who just needs a word.

In other sermons on this text, I've made a lot of the fact that you can't share your faith – you can't just take it out and hand it to somebody. You can't share your confidence in God. BUT – the fact of the matter is, that YOU may be exactly what someone in your life needs. Because sometimes there are folks who are going to say, "I don't believe right now, I can't believe right now, I can't find it anywhere in my brain to believe – but I know YOU do – and I'm going to hold on to that for all I'm worth and hope that God finds me too."

So friends. Fill your lamps. Take an extra flask from this place of worship, sing a hymn or offer praise to God. Walk out of here with a double dose of confidence that there is nothing in all creation that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Fill your lamps full of that good news today and be thankful that – unlike that oil – there's abundance, there's more than enough to go around. And thank God that it's possible to share that good news with others. Thanks be to God; AMEN.

1. David Lose, "...in the Meantime" preaching blog on Matthew 25, November 8, 2017.