

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, November 12, 2023  
 “Are You Prepared?” (Matthew 25:1-13)

A number of years ago, I read a book titled *Last Lecture*. It was written by Randy Pausch, a professor at Carnegie Mellon, who later died with pancreatic cancer. This book, written after his diagnosis, was sort of a last will and testament – a leaving of his legacy – primarily for his three young children so they would know the kind of man their father was. I found it to be a wonderful testimony of a man who lived his final months to their fullest. He worked hard to make sure his family was as prepared as possible for his death.

In the book, Randy shares the lessons he had learned in life. A lesson he learned on preparedness came from Norman, a college classmate. He writes: *One day Norman was giving a presentation on an overhead projector; and in the middle of his talk, the lightbulb on the projector blew out. There was an audible groan from the audience. We’d have to wait ten minutes until someone found a new projector. ‘It’s okay’, Norm announced. There’s nothing to worry about. We watched him walk over to his knapsack and pull something out. He had brought along a spare bulb for the projector.* Norman had been well prepared. Randy had remembered this lesson, even as he prepared to die.

Are you prepared? This is one of the most important and persistent questions we are asked throughout our lives. As young people, we’re asked, Are you prepared for you test tomorrow? Have you studied adequately? Are you prepared for your driver’s license exam? Are you prepared for college?

And that question keeps popping up: Are you prepared for that job interview? Are you prepared to get married? Are you prepared to buy that first house? Are you prepared to be a parent? It’s a question that follows us throughout life. Am I prepared in case there is an accident? Am I prepared for disappointment or failure? Am I prepared for retirement? And at the end of life, we might ask, *Am I prepared to meet my Maker?* It’s a question we might want to avoid, but a question each of us must consider. Am I prepared?

In our gospel text for today, Jesus tells another parable from common, everyday life to help us consider our preparedness to enter the kingdom of heaven. The setting is a wedding. Ten bridesmaids are awaiting the coming of the bridegroom. The bridegroom, of course, represents Jesus, who promises to return one day in glory. The bridesmaids represent the church, those who trust that he is coming again and are waiting for his return. Jesus says that five of them are wise and five were foolish. We need to be careful here not to make this a distinction between good and bad. All ten are there and committed to waiting. The only difference, as we’ll see, is that five felt it would be wise to bring extra oil for their lamps.

No explanation is given, but the bridegroom is delayed. Perhaps there is some last minute haggling over the dowry, we don’t know. But this seems to be a hint from Jesus that his absence would be long extended. Of course, this has certainly proved to be true. We, the church, are all bridesmaids in waiting, still looking for the promised return of Christ more than 2,000 years later.

At any rate, it becomes late in the evening. All ten bridesmaids grow weary of waiting and fall asleep. Now we can't assume negligence on their part. It is at night and their only purpose for being there is to wait for the bridegroom. So when his coming is delayed and they grow drowsy, it is only natural that they might drop off to sleep. Many of us would do the same thing.

I think this is Jesus' way of telling us that our watching does not mean unceasing, conscious anticipation of his return. Time goes on and we can't be continually peering up into heaven. Our Lord has given us a wonderful life filled with joys and responsibilities. We should *not* forget that his return is imminent, but our watching also allows time for normal activities. Money must be earned, investments looked into, food cooked, babies washed, school lessons studied, weddings held, funerals attended, and all the usual activities of life that must go on. Because we are busy doing natural and necessary things does not necessarily mean we have failed to watch. These bridesmaids are waiting for the bridegroom, even as they sleep.

Then at midnight comes the cry: *Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!* The bridesmaids wake up in plenty of time, but there is a problem. They've been waiting so long that their lamps are flickering because they're almost out of oil. Of course, this is a bigger problem to the five who didn't bring along an extra flask of oil – the ones Jesus refers to as foolish. So they make an appeal to the five wise bridesmaids: *Give us some of your oil.* But the wise bridesmaids refuse: *No, there will not be enough for you and us. Go to the dealers and buy some.*

Now, this part of the parable may challenge us a bit. The five bridesmaids' refusal to share their oil seems to say that we need to take care of ourselves. However, this flies in the face of other pivotal stories. For example, if taking care of yourself was the main message of the gospels, the miracle of the loaves and fishes might never have happened. Jesus would have expected that crowd to have been prepared for a late evening and packed their own picnic supper, and would not have performed that miracle.

But that's not God's nature. God loves each of us unconditionally and desires nothing more than to be in relationship with us. And he has made that relationship possible through the death and resurrection of his Son. This gift of grace is offered to each one of us. Some are just more prepared to receive it than others. The wise bridesmaids who refuse to share tell me that there are just some things in life that can't be loaned or borrowed. For example, students can borrow someone else's homework and get by on the assignment, but they can't borrow the hours put in studying for the test. Nor can we borrow someone else's strength or peace of mind to help us through a difficult situation. We can't say, *You're always so calm – even in tough times. Can I borrow some of your peacefulness?*

There are just some reserves that no one else can build up for us, some kinds of preparation we can do only for ourselves. Our faith is one of those things. It's true that God gives us the gift of faith, planting it in our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit. But that faith must be grown if we are going to live our lives for Christ and be prepared for his return. Faith simply cannot be gotten from someone else. I'm as able to receive a chunk of your faith as I am a chunk of your brain. It is just not possible. Faith is a spiritual muscle that must be strengthened. And because God wants our faith grown and strengthened, he gives us the "weights," if you will, to train our spiritual muscle.

The first weight God gives us his holy Word. But, like the dumbbells in my garage, our Bibles are of no benefit if they simply collect dust. They need to be used. They need to be opened and read and studied so that we might hear God speaking to us and drawing us into a closer relationship. That's how faith is deepened. And we need to put ourselves into other places where we can hear God's Word proclaimed: in worship, Sunday School, and Bible study.

God also gives us the Sacraments to develop and strengthen our faith. Holy Communion is not simply bread and wine. Although it is a reminder of Christ's suffering and death, it is so much more. Being in "communion" with someone is mutual participation. The word "communion" implies closeness, togetherness, fellowship, harmony and intimacy. The communion table is a place where we encounter a close friend.

When we hold out our hands to receive the bread and wine, God reaches down, and through those elements, connects with us in a concrete and tangible way. In that holy moment, he comes close enough to touch and taste and smell. Through bread and wine – broken body and spilled blood – God shows us how much he loves us and assures us that there is never a moment when he is not with us and for us.

The Sacrament of the altar is something we should long for, something we should look forward to, and a place where we should visit regularly. In participation with Christ and the communion of saints, this fellowship meal nourishes and strengthens our faith so that we can be spiritually prepared to face any unexpected crisis or trouble that otherwise might break us down. It also prepares us for that day when we meet Christ – whether he comes to us or we go to him.

God's Word, his holy sacraments, and fellowship with other Christians are the weights God provides us to increase our level of faith – to put oil in our lamps, if you will – so that we learn to trust God in all situations. They help build a deep reservoir of faith so, that when our life in this world is over, we can say with trust and conviction, *I know that my Redeemer lives!* No, we can't get our faith from someone else; but we can use the resources God gives us to develop and strengthen our faith so that we are spiritually prepared for whatever life throws at us.

The main thrust of this parable is that we need to be ready. Jesus himself says, *Keep awake because you don't know the day or the hour.* Therefore, we can't just assume that because our name is on the membership role of a church that we are prepared for Christ's coming. It's not our eternal insurance policy. The bridesmaids, remember, represent the church. And when the bridegroom finally comes, half of them are left standing outside the door. They simply have not prepared.

Where do you see yourself in this story? Are you among those who were prepared and are now enjoying the celebration? Or are you among those who thought they would have more time and are left standing on the porch hearing the words, *I do not know you?*

My friends, we can't live our lives saying, *one day.* One day I'm going to stop working so much and spend time with my family. If we don't do it today, the time will soon come when the kids are all grown and we're left regretting all the things we missed. One day I'm going to start saving for retirement. If we don't start today, our income is going to be much more fixed than we

had hoped for. Neither can we say, *One day I'm going to pay more attention to my faith. I'm going to walk with Christ and talk with Christ and learn to trust him in every situation.*

In this parable, Jesus tells us that we need to make *someday* today. We need to fill our lamps with the oil of faith. We need to learn to trust God today. That's the only way we can experience the true joy and peace that God desires for us. And when we learn to trust God in this life, we know we can trust him with our eternal lives.

God freely offers us his grace – and gives us the faith to receive it – but we must grow it and use it. May we keep our lamps trimmed, my friends. May we carry the lightbulb of faith in our knapsacks. That's the way to be truly prepared. Amen.