

“More Than a Rainy Day”

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First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN

FIRST READING: Joshua 24:1-15

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. When they cried out to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt.

Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time. Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. [...]it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant. “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.

Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

SECOND READING: Matthew 25:1-13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

I am going to spend most of the time for this sermon on the Matthew text this morning, even though I think it may be the harder of the two in front of us. Not that the Joshua text isn’t challenging—it certainly is. But the Joshua text is about as direct and clear as words can be already.

“Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

And the words of Jesus in Matthew are just as searching, just as urgent and just as powerful. And the Joshua reading is powerful background interpretation. Jesus is clearly trying to get people like us, disciples, people on this side of the arrival of the Kingdom of God to make a choice, a clear one and a serious one.

But I think we do have to think what Jesus is trying to say to his hearers without using direct address. Direct address only works when people want to listen. Jesus uses parables to get people to decide if they want to listen at all.

The parable is simple enough in its plot. There is a wedding, and 10 young, unmarried women have been asked to serve as bridesmaids. In that culture, the bridesmaids didn't start out with the bride. Instead, they waited at the edge of the town, or at enough distance to form a wedding procession around the bridegroom. And the procession would usually be at night, so that the lights of the lamps that the bridesmaids carried, and the lamps that would be used to light the wedding area itself would shine and flicker.

In that day, light was the wedding music of our day.

So, these lamps were not just a luminary corsage for the bridesmaids. This was the signal that the wedding was starting, and that everyone should wake up, gather around and prepare for the long-awaited celebration.

The problem in this case, as we see, is that the bridesmaids—these ushers, bridesmaids, light and sound organ players of their day—these people on whom the bride and the groom are counting to be such an important part of this once-in-a-life-time event...well, they take different attitudes toward the wedding, the bride and the bridegroom.

Half the group brings their lamp full of oil—and half bring only the lamp.

Now in the world of criminal justice, this hardly seems to be a capital crime.

So, here is where I think we have to spend a little time, because by the time the parable ends, the second group is shut out of the wedding entirely, and they can't get in, no matter how much they plead.

That is a scary ending, and I suppose it is meant to be.

But I think there is a tendency in many people to say, "See, it's not possible to be a Christian. Those girls forgot a cruse of oil and they are going to hell!"

Or, "All of you better pay attention. You better be careful. One slipup, and God is through with you. Boom, bang. You're in hell."

We Southern Christians, in particular, are really prone to go Chicken Little on God and each other, given half a chance. And we are all expecting a hell-fire sermon every time we come to church. So, for all of you out there craving a good hellfire and damnation, I probably can't change your mind. But I would ask you to take just a breath before you jump into the flames in the hopes it will polish your Christianity with the emery cloth of fear.

Now, there is urgency in this text. I am not trying to diminish that at all.

But the whole point of a parable is not to close the door as soon as the speaker says it. The point of the parable is to feel now what you might wind up missing later, if you and I don't pay attention now.

So, that brings us to this question, "What is up with the 5 who don't bring extra oil?"

And what did the 5 who did bring extra oil know that they didn't?

Or was it not at all about what they knew or didn't know?

We like to think that if we knew when something was going to happen, we would be ready.

My taxes will be due on April 15, plus or minus a day or so, in 2012. I should save some money to pay those.

Winter is coming. I should turn my thermostat from cool to heat.

I should see if my car has anti-freeze.

I should look at the weather report for fog, and snow and ICE! Did someone say, "ICE???"

Ice is the hell-fire and brimstone equivalent for people who drive during the winter.

But here is the thing. None of the bridesmaids knew when the bridegroom would arrive. None of them.

But half of them made a decision, took an attitude and a course of action the other 5 didn't.

So, it wasn't about what they knew. That's not the difference between the wise and the foolish.

It's how much they thought about the wedding—and what they thought about it. That's it, pure and simple.

All of us have gone to weddings, odds are, where we went to put in an appearance. We brought no oil of joy with us. We just dragged our bodies over to the wedding, smiled and put in an appearance, looked the room over for friends we might like to talk to, took a glance at the food and the cake to see if there was anything to hold our attention—and if not, we leave at the first socially easy moment.

All of us have also gone to weddings and stayed...but the only reason we stayed was because we felt obligated to be there. And heaven help you if make me stay one minute longer than I had to.

Meanwhile, there is an entirely different story going on around the firebox of the wedding. There is a full-on, hold nothing back, full-speed ahead locomotive of a family and community event hurtling down the tracks, and the people who are on board with the wedding are bending their backs to shovel everything that will burn into that furnace of excitement.

Meanwhile, a group of reluctant passengers can only watch the second hands on their watches to see just how much longer this is going to take.

And when people have to wait very long, they do one of two things. They complain, or they sleep. Sometimes both.

So, they all sleep, some because they were worn out with the preparations, and some because they couldn't find anything else to do.

But then what happens is this. The bridegroom then, the bride now, shows up, and the steam whistle blows and the wedding train is moving. And everything is all about that wedding.

We had a reception for John and Ruth here, a couple of years ago. We thought maybe 100 -125 people might be here. We bought for 200.

You think you might need 5 liters of Diet Coke. You buy 10. You worry about what to do with the extra later, if there is a later.

Because all that matters when the wedding train is coming is getting on board the wedding train and having gobs and gobs, heaps and heaps of anything and everything you might possibly need.

All this for a crowd that may very well be half and half. One half truly excited and into the celebration of the family and friends. And one group ready to get out of their tuxes, or bridesmaid's dress and get on the road pronto.

One group brings all they are to the wedding, and one group just wants to scrape by without looking bad.

Now I have helped host a wedding, and while I have often been one of the 5 virgins who didn't bother with bringing extra oil, I do know that when it is "your wedding" or your child's wedding, it really is a big deal, and you want people to look at it that way.

But even if I saw that some people who came—I'm talking out in TX now, not here. No not here—I didn't ask God to send people to hell for being grumpy or bored or just there for the food, like the guy with no wedding garment. And I didn't pronounce condemnation on anyone for cutting out early to do something they thought was more important.

And really, I don't think I am more merciful or patient than God, do you?

No. Let's get realistic.

But here is what is a hard, icy cold fact—or a blistering truth, depending on your outlook. The wedding doesn't wait for anyone, except the bride or the bridegroom.

And when it's over. It's over. And there is never another wedding day for that wedding. For those guests to that wedding. For the groomsmen and the bridesmaids invited to that wedding. It's over and in the books.

And if you missed it, you REALLY missed it.

Time does not go backward for anyone.

When we were at John and Ruth's wedding, I wanted to film it with our video camera. I managed to remember to bring it with me. I thought I had charged the batteries. I had even thought I brought an extra.

Extra oil. Wise virgin.

I set it up, and I lined it up. I plugged it into a power outlet, just to make sure.

Because I was presiding at the wedding, I had to leave, though. So I turned it on and put it on "pause," so that all someone needed to do was to hit that button again, and it would start. I asked a friend to do that.

And I left.

But what I forgot was that the camera had an automatic shutoff after 10 minutes if you leave it in "pause" mode.

So it turned itself off. The friend tapped the button, as I asked, but nothing happened.

It recorded nothing. It missed everything. The door was shut, and no matter what I said or how badly I wanted to have a recording of my older son's wedding—I didn't. And I don't have it to this day.

I never will.

It was a once-in-a-life-time event. And in one way, I missed.

Thankfully, I didn't miss the wedding. I was there. I was in it. And was I ever into it.

I nearly cried every sentence or two, because this was a day unlike any other. And for John and Ruth, it would never come again. And it wouldn't for me, either.

That is why the door is shut, and it can't be opened.

Yes, God has set a day for the full consummation, the full arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. God is setting a date. We can think of it as a deadline, I guess. But it's no more a deadline than you see on every wedding invitation. Hopefully, instead of a deadline, we see a day, and oh, such a day. A day never to come again.

If you are in on a wedding, you look at that day as a deadline, but the point is to get absolutely as much together before that day as you can, make all the plans you can.

In short, when you are in on a wedding, you are all in. Heart, mind, soul, pocketbook, patience, you name it.

And while it may scare you, you wouldn't take anything for it all. You bring all the oil you could possibly need—and then some, for good measure.

Meanwhile, the challenge, of course, is that most of us are also concerned about another day...the proverbial rainy day. What happens if I need that money my son wants for his wedding to fix the plumbing, or replace my car or have surgery?

Yes, there is the dilemma. Wedding day versus rainy day. Wedding day versus trying out new oxen or sighing heavily that you have to show up at a wedding to keep from looking bad.

Only to discover that this really is a big deal, and you are not ready.

It's not that you have planned to do anything wrong. No.

The point is that you only get one life, my friends. I only get my one life.

And if I miss it, I miss it.

And there is one promise at the center of life, as far as Jesus is concerned, and if you or I decide not to do anything about it, then there just isn't a way to go back and live our lives over.

Nothing could be more crushing than to reach the final destination of our lives and wish we had lived them differently, because we didn't think this day would ever come, or it just never dawned on us how close to dawn it now is, or how far spent the night.

I have sat with people as they thought back over their lives—as they themselves grew old, or they faced their mortality, or they sat in the funeral home, or yes, at a wedding, and they realize how fast time is moving.

Dear friends, if we have plans to do anything with our lives, now is the time to get on with it. Holding ourselves back in thoughts of a rainy day, to try to keep all our options open, not spend too much or give too much of ourselves or our resources because one day we may need them...

Well, the one day that is the day to plan toward is the day the Kingdom of God arrives in all its majesty, power, beauty...

Like the most amazing wedding you have ever seen or heard of.

That's the day you want to be ready for...because, dear friends, we just really, really, really don't want to miss one minute of it.

Start getting ready for it now.

It's coming.

Praise God. It's coming.

Amen.