

Davidson College Presbyterian Church  
Davidson, North Carolina  
Grace Woodward  
"Loving Preparation"  
Matthew 25:1-13  
November 12, 2017  
8:30 a.m.

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***Hear this reading of God's Word, from the gospel according to Matthew.***

Matthew 25: 1-13

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. **2** Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. **3** When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; **4** but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. **5** As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. **6** But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' **7** Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. **8** The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' **9** 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.' **10** 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. **11** Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' **12** But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' **13** Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

***This is the Word of God for the People of God.***

## **Loving Preparation**

I love my grandmother. She has raised 4 boys into gray-haired men, and has 11 grandchildren between the ages of 24 and 6. In recent years I have made a pattern of coming to all of our family gatherings a few days earlier than the rest of our family to help my grandmother prepare. For our summer family beach trip especially, my grandmother and I make big shopping trips to make sure there is enough paper towels, toilet paper, sandwich supplies and blue bell ice cream to last the week. What I love the most about my grandmother is that she finds so much joy in this preparation. She knows that her sons are all capable of buying their own groceries and supplies for the week, but she loves the simple act of preparing for their arrival. It doesn't really matter what she gives each family in their "grandmama goodie bag" when they arrive, and she knows she doesn't have absolutely everything they'll need, but it's an act of love that she has something prepared.

In this passage from Matthew for today, Jesus describes to his disciples what it means to be prepared. He describes a parable in which we meet 10 bridesmaids. He names five of them as foolish, the ones who bring only the oil already in their lamps who assume they will have enough, and he names five as wise, those who bring extra oil with them because they don't know how long they will have to wait. All the bridesmaids brought lamps with them, so they all must have thought they were adequately prepared. But the wise bridesmaids brought extra oil because they didn't know how much they would need, and they wanted to be prepared. However, they didn't bring a whole barrel of oil and they didn't try to bring enough oil to light the entire wedding banquet. In fact, the wedding banquet was already lit, it didn't even need their lanterns. This parable doesn't seem to be about frantically trying to prepare for any foreseeable situation - Because ultimately the timing of the second advent, like most

things in our lives, is out of our hands and beyond our knowing, as much as we like to think we can have control over the timing of things in our lives. Jesus doesn't command us to be prepared for absolutely any outcome, but simply to assume that we don't have enough or know what is enough. Jesus calls us to, on one hand, rest our worries and stress in the grace and love of God but, on the other hand, this parable calls us to constantly seek out the mundane things involved in preparation which bring us closer to others and to God. We need to train ourselves to seek out opportunities to take an extra step in thinking of others, not because we have to, but because when unexpected and unknown things happen, a birth, a death, a tragedy, or celebration, we can lean on our preparation and our relationships with God and our neighbors to weather whatever storm we face in ways that we could have never imagined.

I think Jesus is calling us to be thoughtful and conscious in our earthly preparation. To constantly be curious about what else there is to learn and see in the world, beyond what is obvious and expected, and to be thinking about how we can bring more of ourselves wherever we go. How can we love a little bit more, how can we give a little bit more of our time to others, and how can we do a little bit more than what is expected? How can we bring the extra oil? How can we train our minds to always think about preparation? Not because doing so guarantees entrance to the eternal wedding banquet in heaven, but because thinking about preparation as a journey, and not a to-do list task, works to bring the Kingdom of God closer and makes life on earth better for everyone.

I think about the way that my grandmother prepares for our family gatherings as an example of enjoying the journey of preparation. Together we find so much joy in picking out a beach toy for each cousin and thinking about how many loaves of bread we'll need throughout the week. One of my favorite years however, on the last day of our week long trip I opened our hall closet and found 2 bags full of paper towels and other goodies that we had forgotten to hand out. I laughed to myself because I realized that what was in each bag didn't even matter - my uncles and cousins had gotten along just fine without everything that my grandmother and I had picked out. My grandmother and I did all this preparation as an act of love and we were so caught up spending time as a family that we forgot about the preparation.

This passage has some difficult aspects to it, but luckily for us, it's a parable that is meant to raise questions instead of answer them. The first question that comes to mind for me is why didn't the wise bridesmaids share their extra oil with the foolish? Aren't we as Christians taught to give away our excess, to ask for just our daily bread, to give away our coat if we have two, to tithe in a way where we feel the sacrifice?

What if in this parable we see being "wise" as having a mindset that is the result of sustained practice in living a life of preparation? We as Christians have to learn and practice what it means to prepare and wait - in both the milestones in our lives and in the ultimate wait for the second advent, and return of Christ. This sustained practice is something that takes time and repetition and it seems like this parable is saying that ultimately we are responsible for our own focus on preparation, and can't rely on others to do all the preparation for us.

As a college student I see this as looking up from my computer, up from my cellphone, and up from my textbooks to notice the ways that I can be a tool of the kingdom of God right now. How can I pause on my walk from class to meeting to class and talk to a friend I haven't seen recently. Or how can I find ways to use my own skills to help make someone else's preparation easier? How can I find opportunities to show love and kindness to everyone, even those who don't show love and kindness towards me? How can I build bridges in my community?

Finding joy in the preparation and wait looks like my grandmother who lovingly prepares for our family - not because she's frantically trying to get through her to-do list, but because she knows that there is joy and love to be found in this act of preparation.

This is the mindset shift that seems to differentiate the "wise" from the "foolish" bridesmaids - the foolish did exactly what they thought they needed to do, and when they didn't have enough oil for their lamps they frantically went out to look for more. I bet they saw their preparation as checking off a to-do list of exactly what was expected, but the wise had already thought beyond a checklist.

Having an oil lamp and making sure there was enough oil was a pretty simple and mundane task in Jesus' time. There is a mundane quality to the preparation required in this passage. In 2017 this could look like going to the grocery store and choosing to pick up your partner's favorite ice cream, or calling to check in on your children or parents just because, or checking in on a neighbor, or reaching out to a friend you haven't seen in awhile, or being present and lending an ear when someone wants to talk through a stressful or traumatic situation. These things are not flashy, but they are everyday things that bring you closer to those around you and to God. Because there will come a day when these mundane things will be required more than you could have ever imagined, and by focusing on the sustained practice of preparation you'll be ready.

I find that I can easily get so stuck on focusing on what's next that I miss what is happening right now and gloss over the mundane. I gloss over the process of getting from point A to point B and forget about the journey. How can we keep whatever it is we're waiting for, either on earth or the ultimate wait for the second advent, in mind while constantly noticing opportunities right now to find joy in preparation and waiting? How can we, here today, look up and look around to see the ways that we can lovingly prepare and wait together?

Amen.