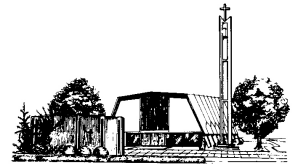


Campbell United Methodist Church

The Weekly Sermon



Practical Parables: *The Ten Bridesmaids*

A Blend of Wisdom and Foolishness

Rev. Alan Jones

February 20, 2011

Matthew 25:1-13,

I used to be senior pastor in a church where we did around 150 weddings each year. So I can tell you wedding stories... and quite a number of wedding horror stories. Often expectations at wedding ceremonies are so high that it seems to somehow invite disaster. In this culture, waiting for the bride is the big deal, and making sure that everybody is ready when she arrives. In today's parable the bride doesn't even get a mention. I am curious to know where she might have been as all this hullabaloo was going on!... not to mention the parents!

In the ancient Palestinian culture, weddings happened at night with no fixed time to start, and as the bridegroom arrives, the festivities start. The primary reason both then and in contemporary Palestinian culture is the haggling over the financial arrangements between the two families involved in the wedding, and has little to do with the man and woman getting married. It does seem to challenge even their customs though for the bridegroom to arrive at midnight... although within our own congregation there are celebration parties that don't really get going until around 11pm.

The way Matthew presents this parable, I am sure that he understood it to be a warning to the young church to be ready for the second coming of Jesus. The images fit the facts. Matthew would see the young Christian community as "bridesmaids" who had prepared themselves for the second coming of the Messiah, and would see the traditional Jewish community as people who had not.

Please indulge me again, and allow yourself to see this story as Jesus assisting us with our own interior journey, not as a means of judgment and putting us down, but rather as a means to deepen our own spiritual self-understanding.

The image of the wedding is a recurring theme in dreams. It seems that sometimes we all struggle with the different dimensions of who we are. Most of us have ambivalence programmed deep into our souls. Part of us wants to do the hard work of being prepared and half of us would rather relax. Some of us more obviously have the "Boy Scout" or "insurance agent" kind of personality that more naturally gravitates towards being prepared (for whatever) and some of us operate believing that life is too short to spend extra energy on eventualities that may never happen. I suspect that if we did a survey this

morning on who has their earthquake preparedness kit ready for the “big one,” ...what do you think? I guess we’d probably find about one third ready, one third thinking it’s a waste of time and one third feeling guilty.

In our story you might want to think of the bridegroom as your organizing self, some psychological types might recognize the “ego” here... and the ten bridesmaids represent our internal scatteredness, -some responsible, some irresponsible... but all have gone to sleep. The light is the light of awareness and being spiritually awake. The final admonition of the parable is to **keep awake**, which I really do believe is one of the central teachings of Jesus. For the Kingdom of Heaven to happen it is necessary for us to be awake. The Kingdom is not simply a *Jesus thing* or a *God thing*. We are central to the history The Kingdom creates.

The theme of being late or sleeping through some major, significant, event is a central theme in the life of dreams. We all have some kind of fear that we are not good enough and not prepared. Dreams are often about arriving late for an event or missing the train or the plane that was taking us to our destination. This dream reality points us to some of our deeper yearnings of the soul.

In the life of the spirit there is a profound sense of timing. We all know that the spiritual journey of which we are a part has a schedule. Howard Thurman speaks about the *temptation to postpone*. We all do it. Procrastination creates our own feelings guilt, and we feel bad about ourselves. We are moving and growing, and sometimes the growth isn’t linear... along a road, instead it is circular and the destination isn’t clear.

The marriage ceremony is a rite of passage. It marks our transition from adolescence to mature adulthood, or, at least, that is the hope! It prepares us for the possibility of giving life to another human being. It marks our “graduation” to be a “player” in the world rather than a passive recipient.

It is internally horrifying to us that we might not be ready or worse still –sound asleep, when the one moment of opportunity comes our way. It is our worst nightmare. In order to be prepared we need to have an internal conversation and hear all the voices that are speaking in our heart. To say it’s five of one and five of the other is probably an oversimplification. Most of us are much more complicated than that would suggest. And it’s certainly simply of oil in the lamp or not... our internal selves tend to be very complex and diverse. We are a wonderful mix of wisdom and foolishness, and we spend our lives figuring out who can really make the most sense of the world around us.

By the way, it is never, never too late to explore the inward journey. For many of us, it is only in later life that we feel the freedom to take the risks necessary to have that kind of inner dialogue. If this is new to you... maybe start keeping a journal, write down the random thoughts, feelings, ideas that pop up in your brain. Look out for intuitions that come unannounced. Monitor dreams that most people would dismiss as weird or bizarre. The life of the soul should always have a feeling of fluidity, of change and growth. It will never be rigid or solidified.

I truly believe that this is what Jesus was getting at with his parable. The Kingdom of Heaven is primarily about an inner journey, an inner flexibility of the spirit that enables us to be fully awake, fully present in the moment to respond to all that is going on in the world around us. It is the opposite of denial. It is the opposite of shutting ourselves off from the painful realities of a crazy world. Living with the reality of the ten bridesmaids enables us to be awake in a sin-filled world and not be caught up in it in such a way that we are overwhelmed by it. The Kingdom of Heaven calls us, as Kipling reminds us, to keep our heads when all around us are losing theirs, and blaming us for the problem.

It is when we stay spiritually awake that we can respond to the needs as they present themselves, on God's time schedule and not simply when it's convenient for us.

Talking with couples about marriage as they are preparing for a wedding sometimes feels like a fools errand. There are a thousand details to plan... the reception, the clothes, the flowers, the photographers... and all the different opinions and needs in both families. It is a miracle that many couples survive getting married. I'll often say... *When you get to the day, please try to put all the logistics out of your mind. It's not about the flowers or the clothes or the menu... It's about the two of you building a relationship of love and trust that will endure for years into the future.*

In spite of all our cynicism, marriage is all about hope. It is anticipation of great things to come –deep realities that will endure. It is a joyful time. And so it is in the internal “marriage” that happens within our own souls as we bring together our own opposites and contradictions. Our fears and worries find peace with our hopes and dreams. Our old guilt's and anxieties find trusted partners in our own self-confidence and abiding faith. An internal relationship is possible. God is at work within us creating something new... I do see marriage, internal and external, as essentially sacramental. A miracle happens in your life and transformation has begun.

There's a chorus that I know that many of know from Sunday school or summer camp... join me if you will:

**Give me oil in my lamp,
Keep me burning,
Give me oil in my lamp, I pray.
Give me oil in my lamp,
Keep me burning,
Keep me burning
Till the break of day.**

**Chorus:
Sing hosanna! Sing hosanna!
Sing hosanna to the King of kings!
Sing hosanna! Sing hosanna!
Sing hosanna to the King!**