

Don't Forget A Compass for the Fog

Sunday, November 10, 2002

Matthew 25: 1-13

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I am Tom Lenhart North Prospect's student minister for this academic year. I'm a first year student at Harvard Divinity School. And you are right. I'm a little longer in the tooth than most first year students. I recently left my 30-year career as a trial lawyer in Washington, D.C. to explore a call to ministry. Recently a professor of mine reminded several of us that since at least the 1400's preaching has always involved the minister telling the congregation what they were doing wrong and what they needed to do to correct those errors. I want to start by breaking with tradition. I want to thank you for making me feel welcome and a part of your community. It has been a special gift for which I am very appreciative.

When Dudley proposed that I should first preach in November, he gave me several alternative Sundays. For reasons of scheduling I picked today. As you know North Prospect is a lectionary church which means each Sunday we use a scripture passages or two taken from the lectionary program—a three year schedule of liturgical passages for each Sunday used by most mainline Protestant denominations. When I finally got home—after picking this Sunday—I read for the first time our scripture reading from Matthew. I confess my first reaction was to think of various card games. I fantasized that perhaps I could discard this text and draw a new one or two from the biblical deck. My concern—my apprehension did not lessen when my New Testament professor—a venerable giant in the field—commented that there were certain gospel passages best left by junior ministers to their more senior colleagues to preach about because they were just too hard. Of course, our Matthew lesson for today was one of those “too hard” passages. When my heart returned to a normal rate after receiving this belated advice—I realized I was stuck. But then I was reminded that God doesn't always make her lessons for us easy to understand or easy to follow. In fact when I really focused on today's text I find it enormously revealing and powerful advice for today.

It is a text, however, that on first reading is peculiar, and indeed odd. Bridesmaids, a groom but no bride! A bridegroom who arrives at midnight for his wedding without explanation for the delay! Shops selling lamp oil at midnight (and those were days long before 7-11s and all night drug stores.) What is going on in this passage?

With the help of commentators, let me see if I can make a little sense of this text. While we don't know much of first century wedding practices we know that this is a strange kind of wedding story. And of course this parable of Jesus has nothing at all to do with a wedding. Rather this is a parable attributed to Jesus that was included by Matthew in his Gospel to instruct the early Christian Church. The bridesmaids are best understood as the early church and its members. The bridegroom is Jesus. In a sense this story is about the Second Coming of Jesus. The message to the early church and its members is a stark one—those of you that are prepared for the Second Coming (have oil in your lamps) will receive salvation and eternal life. Those of you ill prepared (short of oil) will be found wanting and will be condemned. We must remember

that this text was written to a fledgling and precarious church, separated by mere decades from Jesus' life and death, desperately anticipating the Second Coming.

What possibly is the relevance of this lesson for us? We as a church have long since shifted our focus from the imminent return of Jesus to focus on what our faith demands of us in the here and now. The text is nonetheless remarkably apt for our day. For when looked at closely it is not about being watchful for the second coming but about the importance of preparation for the here and now---preparation in our lives today. The foolish maids were foolish, not because they fell asleep—weren't watchful enough for the groom—but because they didn't have enough oil—they weren't prepared! This story is about lack of preparation –about procrastination.

As a society we are quite familiar with lack of preparation and procrastination. Just go to your local Post Office on the evening of April 15. What you see—the long lines of late tax payers—is an example of our procrastination writ large. In my old profession the common wisdom was that you could tell the older more experience trial lawyers from their more junior colleagues—not by the amount of gray hair or even the quality of their work—but by their ability to get extensions of deadlines.

More than 40 years ago, I was vacationing with my parents on the Maine coast. My father, a Congregational minister, retreated there each summer to recharge his batteries. He owned a 45-year-old wooden boat which leaked quite a bit but which served to take us on family excursion. One afternoon my Father said to me, "Let's go for a spin in the boat." So we proceeded off. The weather was hazy and a little overcast---nothing special for Maine in the summer. We traveled a number of miles out to sea—out to that point where you have to squint to see the sliver of land on the horizon behind you. However, in what seemed like an instant, the weather changed and we were in a fog so thick I couldn't see the front of the boat a few feet ahead of us. My father and I were confident that we could get back to our harbor. We knew the ocean "like the back of our hands." We were not concerned because we had forgotten to bring the compass with us. We proceeded to turn the boat around and to return to the harbor. About a half-hour later—out of the fog—a voice with a thick Maine accent yelled from his lobster boat, "Where ya goin'?" We replied "To Boothbay Harbor." There was a pause then he said, "Not in **that** direction you aren't—you're headin' for Portugal! You folks betta follow me." We did—with a huge sigh of relief. He led us back in, far enough so that we could see familiar shoreline through the fog—enough to let us know where we were and hence where to go; this was a lesson in lack of preparation that I have never forgotten. Yes, I do take a compass with me now, even on sunny days.

Why didn't we take a compass? Why didn't the foolish bridesmaids take enough oil? In both cases it is impossible to know for sure. But experience suggests there are a number of likely possibilities:

- We don't prepare. We procrastinate because we are simply lazy at times, don't get to item, can't be bothered.
- Sometimes we don't do things to prepare because we believe we can do it later just as well. The lawn will be there tomorrow—what's one more day of growth?
- Sometimes we don't prepare because it's too hard or unpleasant. I find writing hard work. Do I therefore start my paper—indeed my sermons—weeks or days ahead? No, I start when

time and deadlines have left me no other choice. Perhaps I am not alone in this practice. How many people eagerly and in a timely manner pick-up their check books and go to Quicken to balance one's check book?

- Sometimes we don't prepare because it's not necessary—it's sunny—no need for a compass. The groom will be on time for heaven sake—it's his wedding. We don't need to get more oil for the lamps. I wonder if anyone here has ever run out of gas, having passed a gas station thinking, "It's not necessary to stop. There will be another if we need it." But there wasn't.

What is wrong with a little procrastination, with not preparing fully? The lawn eventually gets cut, the papers get written and the tax returns filed. But indeed that's not always the case---there are consequences to our failures to prepare.

In Lewis Carroll's sequel to "Alice in Wonderland" called "Through the Looking Glass", there is a wonderful and telling exchange between Alice and the Queen. The Queen is trying to entice Alice to be her lady's maid by offering her, "Two pence a week and jam every other day." Alice responds, "Well, I don't want any [jam} today..." The Queen says, "You couldn't have it if you did want it—the rule is, jam tomorrow and jam yesterday, but no jam today." G. K. Chesterton, the British poet and mystery writer, referred to this as the "green pastures" illusions—jam yesterday, jam tomorrow but none today. And of course, that is the danger of procrastination—lack of preparation—which Matthew is pointing to. We end up never having jam today. Every parent or close friend, who has missed a loved one's birthday, play performance, sporting event, knows that some things in life can not be done later. No matter what we might wish, there will never be another fourth birthday, "Mikado" performance, little league game, or 50th wedding anniversary. A thank you note put off too long simply can never be sent. Lack of preparation or procrastination sometimes leads us to forget important things. They vanish from our horizons and from our consciousness.

If we stopped here the Matthew text would potentially be yet another guide to good moral conduct that we could add to the self-help shelf in our book case libraries. But it is more than that. What is the oil that the foolish bridesmaids forgo. In my view it is what the Gospels tell us Jesus commanded us: "To love God and one another" not when it is convenient, easy or when we can fit it in—but every day. Or stated another way in the lyrical words of the book of Micah we are expected and challenged "to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God" every day. To procrastinate with respect to these is what Matthew so strongly condemns in today's text.

Justice delayed is indeed justice denied. Simply ask the prisoner falsely convicted, released years later because of DNA testing, whether the apology offered and the few dollars received bring back those lost years? The British Poet Edward Young wrote more than 300 years ago "procrastination is the thief of time." And of course, time stolen can never be returned and the justice lost with it is also gone forever. As Stephen Jay Gould, the eminent biologist, observed when talking about evolution: Live is not a video that can be rerun. That is exactly the point for us—we can't rerun life—to recapture that episode we somehow missed. As Matthew reminds us it is not enough to try and refill our lamps at midnight. We are challenged to keep oil in the lamp always—to love one another, to do justice, to love kindness, today not tomorrow lest we fall victim to our own "green pastures illusion." Moreover this responsibility to have enough oil is

directed to each of us. There is that somewhat unsettling part of the Matthew text in verses 8 and 9 where the foolish bridesmaids realized that they are out of oil and ask the wiser bridesmaids to share their oil and they refuse! When I first read that verse, I thought it's wrong not to share. Then I thought more about this. The Matthew text reminds us that Jesus asks each of us to do justice and to love kindness. No one can do it for us—there are no surrogates available.

Finally, there is another aspect to this text. The problem with not having enough oil in our lamps often results because we follow our own agenda for life—not God's. We are sometimes too busy doing those things we think important that we put off those on God's agenda for us. I do not underestimate the challenge in doing good—to doing God's agenda? It asks us to love our family and neighbors not simply when they are loveable but precisely when they are not. Indeed, God asks us to love our enemies. God asks us to work for justice even when we are not the source of the injustice. In short, God's agenda is hard—it is inconvenient. No wonder we put it off. Heaven knows I do.

The Matthew text has been seen by some as providing the moral blueprint for obtaining salvation. For me that is not a very satisfactory reading because I can't imagine a kind of tally sheet in the sky with columns of pluses and minuses to be used some how for rendering judgement. I believe that view is at odds with the message of unearned grace so central to the new covenant in the New Testament. Nonetheless, what Matthew was telling us about having our lamps full is an important part of our faith. Faith is not simply about watching and planning for the future coming of the bridegroom. Faith is about our lamps lighting the world today, about creating the kingdom of God here and now.

Matthew is reminding us to bring oil for our lamps every day—because that light is our compass to that Kingdom here. So my advice is take that compass with you, even if it doesn't look like fog because it will always guide you back to God's safe harbor.