

**The High Cost Of Oil**  
**Matthew 25:1-13**  
**Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, November 9, 2008**

This is definitely one of Jesus' more unnerving parables. Ten young women are chosen to be in the wedding party because of their intimate relationship with the bride and groom. They were responsible for making the wedding go as smoothly as possible. Unhappily half the wedding party violated that trust, causing embarrassment to both the bride and groom, so the door to the banquet was slammed shut in their faces after being told, "Truly I never knew you."

This isn't a parable about Christ saving believers and damning non believers but a parable about "chosen" people who wash out because of their lack of commitment.

To make this parable really speak to us, it's helpful to know the traditions surrounding first century Jewish weddings. The groom and his family would leave their house under the cover of darkness and process to the home of the bride. Unlike weddings today, there was no set time for the ceremony. In fact, part of the fun was the element of surprise with the groom showing up when least expected. That explains why the bridesmaids fell asleep while waiting for the groom.

This wedding custom most definitely draws from the Old Testament metaphor of God being the groom and Israel his bride and the obligation of the faithful to be ready for God to reveal himself, especially since the Jews were already waiting hundreds of years for their long-expected Messiah.

Some might interpret the foolish maidens to represent the Pharisees and Temple Priests who fell asleep at the wheel when the Messiah (Jesus) finally did appear. But this isn't a parable about God throwing the Jews under the bus in favor of Christ's new, emerging Church. That interpretation is completely wrong and would only leave us feeling smug and superior. Instead the two major themes of this parable are watchful waiting and careful preparation. So many times Jesus taught his disciples to be alert and ready because you never know when God will unexpectedly show up. What do I mean by "show up?" You can take it to mean many things, God showing up at your hour of death or the Second Coming, both one time events we should certainly be ready for; but God often shows up in everyday events, like when you meet someone in crisis, or you encounter a situation that demands courage and sacrifice. Since God is present and available every minute of every day, the big question is, when he finally does show up will you be available so you can be used to make the Kingdom become both near and real and not just for yourself.

Only intentional watchful waiting makes you ready to seize any opportunity to be and make the difference. Unfortunately waiting and watching are not necessarily fun activities. Who likes waiting for anything? Waiting is usually tedious and nerve wracking. It seems most of life is spent in mindless waiting, be it in your doctor's office, for a bus, or for important news that will impact your life forever. Other times waiting can be so boring you become lazy and fall asleep, like these foolish maidens.

That's why we need to wait for life to happen the same way kids wait for Christmas to happen. Kids know Christmas is coming by watching for the signs; stores

in the malls put up decorations and grownups start getting ready at home. They get excited and caught up anticipating that wonderful day and when it finally comes, they're ready.

I realize not everything we wait for is as fun as Christmas, but I am suggesting we need a basic reorientation in our waiting habits so we don't end up left out like those foolish bridesmaids.

Here it is: don't just watch and wait for things to happen, watch and wait for God to happen because God happens in every person you meet and every situation you encounter. Sometimes it's obvious, most of the time, it's not, but always God makes himself known, so be alert.

How? Begin by realizing life is more than what you see, hear and touch. Develop your sixth sense by discovering your spiritual potential. Unfortunately spiritual formation usually isn't at the top of our "to do" list. We're too busy gathering and processing information that feeds our minds but not our souls. As a result we're educated intellectually, but spiritually illiterate.

So, being alert means being prepared and here's where the preparation comes in. The wise bridesmaids were wise because they didn't run out of oil. Think about that. When an oil lamp runs out of oil or better still your car runs out of gas, you're in trouble. That's why you keep a close watch on the gas gauge and make regular stops at the gas station.

Likewise, filling yourself up is not an option. You have to do it yourself; no one can do it for you, the hard lesson learned by the foolish bridesmaids.

You've heard Janet and me constantly encouraging you to keep up with your spiritual disciplines. I wonder how many of us pick up a Bible or go on line to a daily devotion site to read a scripture, a meditation and a prayer. How many of us belong to a Bible study or a prayer group so we can experience strength through numbers? Do you do any of these things, or are you lazy?

Some might say the foolish bridesmaids' root problem was laziness. And when lazy, unprepared people are caught in the act what do they do? They expect you to bail them out! You've known people like that. In school they begged to copy your homework, at work they con you into covering for them, in a one-sided friendship you do all the heavy lifting. But sooner or later someone will finally stand up and say "no" and like the foolish bridesmaids who had to run home for oil, these lazy people won't be back in time for the party.

Back in the Middle Ages the monks identified one sin in particular that plagued their communities. The Latin word they used is *acedia*; we know it by the word sloth. Sloth is apathy, putting off what God wants you to do because you don't care. It leads to the absence of compassion and wasting your resources on selfish desires. You come to think only about you, not your family, neighbor or coworker. Sloth corrupts the heart and cheapens life.

This I believe was the root sin of the foolish maidens. They were honored by their friends to play a role in their wedding but because they were lazy and let the bride down. The other bridesmaids were wise if only because they turned the foolish ones down flat, because if they shared their oil, the whole celebration would have been enveloped in darkness.

It would be easy to make this a fire and brimstone sermon, scaring you into faith in Christ. That, however, would be both unwise and unhealthy. I know from personal experience how damaging fear tactics can be. From childhood into my college years I was afraid of God because I was taught in Sunday School God was angry and vengeful. Yes, Jesus spoke of hell and damnation many times but he also preached the good news of forgiveness and grace. Yes, be aware of the consequences of spiritual sloth, but be doubly aware of the Gospel of the second chance.

Christ invites us to join him in the great celebration of life and to know the depths of his love. God calls us all to be his friends and entrusts us with the sacred responsibility to do our part to make the celebration go as smoothly as possible. So fill your lamps and keep them full, for the bridegroom, Christ, is very near. Be alert, be prepared and when he shows you will not only be ready to welcome him, you also will be ready to light the way for others who have accepted his kind invitation.

Jesus said, "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know the day or the hour when the bridegroom will come." Or do you?

Let us pray.