

“Being Ready”
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[Matthew 25:1-13](#)

“Never do today what you can put off until tomorrow.” Does that motto apply to anyone here? I have to admit that sometimes it applies to me. For example, early in my preaching career, I was a guest speaker at a church, preaching on today’s scripture passage, and I completed that sermon on Sunday morning, in the parking lot of the church right before going in.

Many of us have that kind of tendency – to wait until the last possible minute to get something done. There are some theories on procrastination – it’s about fear of failure; it’s about fear of success; it’s about perfectionism; it’s about laziness; there’s also a theory that some of us just seem to thrive on the adrenaline rush of working up against a deadline. For whatever reason, *I* might have found myself without the extra oil needed to be welcomed into the wedding banquet if I were a character in the parable from this morning’s text.

In the parable this morning, Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven will be like the wedding banquet he describes. Now, in those days, weddings were somewhat different from today’s weddings in many ways, notably in scheduling. Today, a very specific time and date are chosen for the wedding ceremony. I recall that our wedding invitations said Kristi would walk down the aisle at “half past three.” In those days, however, a *general* time for a wedding was announced, but not a specific time. A wedding could take place anytime within a week or more. It took place when the bridegroom arrived and no one knew exactly when that would be. Like today’s weddings, though, wedding celebrations then were a very big deal. They were probably actually a *bigger* deal *then* than now – in a world with much suffering, a wedding was cause for great joy. No one wanted to miss out on the celebration. But, Jesus tells us that those who were not prepared were not allowed entry into the banquet and since He tells us that this is like heaven, those who are not prepared will not be welcomed into heaven. *Ouch!* That hurts. We have this concept of the ever-graceful God who will always welcome us in and so this parable stings quite a bit. While God *is* graceful and welcoming, there does come a point at which we have waited too long, we have procrastinated too long. Lewis Grizzard, the late humorist and author was to have open heart surgery and was visited by his minister the night before the surgery. Grizzard confessed to his minister that he had not exactly lived the life that he should and asked if there were still time to repent. The minister looked at his watch

and said “Yes, but I’d hurry if I were you.” We procrastinators must be careful not to procrastinate too long. Verse 13 tells us “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” We must be prepared for the second coming of Christ because, like the bridegroom, we do not know when He will come.

One day in one of my seminary classes, our professor, Dr. Mitzi Minor brought up supposed “signs” of the end days, such as tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes. She then asked the class “When the people in your congregations ask if these are signs of the Second Coming, what should you say to them?” Almost in unison, we students said “No!” She replied in some anguish “*No*, that’s not the right answer! The right answer is ‘I don’t know!’” “I don’t know” isn’t much of an answer, is it? It’s not very satisfying, but there are times when the right answer is “I don’t know!” Are we living in the end times? Maybe! *I don’t know!* Jesus tells us in Matthew 24:36: “No one knows of that day and hour -- not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” In Luke 21:7, when the disciples ask Jesus about the coming of the kingdom, “He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.’” Over the centuries, there have been self-proclaimed prophets who announce that *they* know when Jesus will return. Others have written religious fiction, made popular by our desire to know, such as the authors of the *Left Behind* series of books. A different author, Tony Campolo, has a word of wisdom for us, though, when he says, “When it comes to the Second Coming, I’m on the welcoming committee, not on the planning committee.”

We can’t know when Jesus will return, so should we sit around doing nothing, should we be procrastinating? *That* answer is *not* “I don’t know!” That one, I believe is clear. There is a bumper sticker that I find humorous. It says “Jesus is Coming – Look Busy.” It may be humorous because it exposes one of the problems of the church. We know we are supposed to be doing something, but what is it? Sometimes we can’t quite figure it out and so we instead try to just *look busy*. What *should* we be doing then? We should be going about the work of the kingdom. We should be doing what Christ did while he was on earth. We should be concerned with the question “How can I be ready?” rather than “When will Christ return?”

John F. Kennedy was fond of a particular story. During his 1960 presidential campaign he often used it to close his speeches. It is the story of Colonel Davenport, Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives in 1780. One day at about noon, while the House was in session, the sky of Hartford suddenly grew dark and gloomy. There were threatening sounds from the skies and it was as dark as midnight. Some of the representatives looked out the windows and thought this was a sign that the end of the world was at hand. An uproar ensued with the representatives calling for

immediate adjournment. But Davenport rose and said, “Gentlemen, the Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought.” Candles were brought and the session continued.

John Wesley, the early leader in the Methodist movement, believed strongly that we should live every day in the presence of Christ. He was once asked what he would do if he knew his Lord would return the next day. He said, “I would go to bed and go to sleep; wake up in the morning, and go on with my work, for I would want Him to find me doing what he had appointed.”

Just what is it that God has appointed for us? First, it is important to note that this is not a parable that says we should be *overworked*. Notice that *both* the foolish and the wise bridegrooms became tired and slept. The wise bridegrooms were simply prepared before they slept. In many churches, there are those who are working themselves *too* hard. If you work so hard that you are too tired to respond when the call comes, your work has not done you much good. Notice that Wesley did not say that, if he knew Christ would return the next day, he would stay up all night getting things ready. He said he would go to bed and sleep. We might safely assume that Wesley had prepared all along, rather than procrastinating. We should go about the work of the kingdom as we go about our lives. We are not cramming for a test at the last minute – we are working daily for God’s kingdom to come, on earth, as it is in heaven. We also cannot rely on others to get us ready. The foolish bridesmaids wanted to take some of the oil of the wise bridesmaids. What would that have accomplished? *All ten* bridesmaids would then have run out of oil. We cannot borrow our preparedness from others or count on them to be prepared for us. We must each be prepared for the call of Christ whenever it may come in our own lives.

Unfortunately, this kind of preparation often only comes after a “wake-up call” of some sort. The survivor of a heart attack realizes how fragile life is and becomes a changed woman, giving of her time and money to the work of the kingdom. The husband and father who is working 90 hours a week to work his way up the corporate ladder realizes how important his family is only after his wife takes the children and leaves him because he was never there for them. The alcoholic doesn’t really consider himself an alcoholic until he hits rock bottom. There is something about human nature that brings about this sort of behavior. There is the procrastinator in all of us. There is the voice that says, “There’s always more time.” Jesus calls us to be always prepared because we do not know the day or the hour. At some point, there won’t be more time – whether that time we are counting on is in our earthly lives or our earthly relationships. The kingdom of God is not something that we will

experience only in Heaven. The kingdom of God is here now, on earth. We experience the kingdom of God in the love and friendship of our Christian brothers and sisters. We experience it in the beauty of God's creation. If we look around, we may see the kingdom of God breaking out all around us. It is our responsibility to spread that good news, to be prepared and to help others become prepared.

The work of Christ was only *begun* in His earthly ministry. It is *our* task to take up that work in *our* ministries. We all have a ministry on this earth – not just those of us who stand up before congregations and attempt to speak. Each of us should be concerned with the things Jesus was – and *is*. What kinds of things are those? They are as we are told in Amos 5: “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” They are as we are told in Micah 6: “do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.” They are serving others, as Jesus instructed us in Matthew 20. They are feeding the hungry, taking in the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the captive – taking care of “the least of these,” as Jesus told us later in the same chapter of Matthew 25 from which we read today's parable. They are what Jesus called the “weightier matters of...justice and mercy and faith” in Matthew 23. It is going forth and making disciples of all the nations, as Jesus instructed us in Matthew 28. If we procrastinate, others may run out of time, as well. In the cold of this winter, if we put off serving those in need, it just might be too late for them. If we put off telling our neighbors about Christ, it just might be too late for them. If we put off speaking out for justice for those who have no voice, it just might be too late for them. By working to further the kingdom of God on earth right now, we will be prepared for that day, whenever it may come.

Some of the apocalyptic books that are popular these days seem to have a goal of scaring us about the second coming of Christ, but I don't think Jesus is trying to scare us with this passage. This is not a horror story – it is a story of joyful anticipation. When He says that we do not know the day nor the hour, He isn't saying, “I'm gonna sneak up on you and get you!” We should read this with joy! We have *not* been “Left Behind.” Jesus *is* coming back! Alleluia! Let us prepare ourselves for His return by spreading the kingdom of God on earth, in the lives we live every day. When will Christ return? *I don't know*, but my prayer is that we will be prepared when that day comes. Amen.