

**Rev. Dr. Craig Howard**  
**“Eyes Wide Open”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, November 8, 2020**

**Joshua 24:14-25**

*‘Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.’*

*Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.’*

*But Joshua said to the people, ‘You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.’ And the people said to Joshua, ‘No, we will serve the LORD!’ Then Joshua said to the people, ‘You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.’ And they said, ‘We are witnesses.’ He said, ‘Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.’ The people said to Joshua, ‘The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.’ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.*

**Matthew 25:1-13**

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

Now I have a tendency live my life with no regrets. But there's one thing I regret not doing, and that's getting an MBA degree. Now I graduated undergrad with a degree in industrial organizational psychology which basically means the psychology of work. My plan was to complete this degree then apply to grad school and get my MBA. Now somewhere between my plan and my degree, life happened. I got married. I started to work and earn a living. I had the good fortune to have a successful insurance business. Then came the house and the kids. And somewhere in there came God's call to the ministry, and the next thing I know I'm doing ministry that is heavily administrative, that takes finance and marketing and personnel and strategic planning. I'm doing all right. But I sure wish I'd gotten that MBA. I believe that degree would have really helped prepare me for my future even when my future meant going into ministry.

Now our parable today is about preparation and how to prepare ourselves while waiting. It's the second part of a three-part parable sermon series that Jesus is preaching. These three parables - the faithful and unfaithful slaves, the ten bridesmaids, and the parable of the talents - all deal with waiting. They all address the question of how the church should act while Jesus is away and how the church is to live in the world during the gap period--the period between the time that Jesus leaves this earth and the time when he returns. Now these parables are relevant for us today because Jesus has not returned yet, at least not since the last time I checked. Many have predicted when Jesus will return, where Jesus will return, and how. But these three parables make it clear that when Jesus does come back it will be a surprise to all of us. Since Jesus has not returned, we should listen closely to what the spirit has to say to us, and the church, through these parables., and especially our parable of the ten bridesmaids today.

So, what do the ten bridesmaids do while waiting for the bridegroom to arrive? What behavior can we observe that separates the wise bridesmaids from the foolish ones? Surprisingly all of the bridesmaids do the same thing. They all become drowsy and sleepy. They all wake up when the announcement of the bridegroom is made. They all come out to meet him. They all trimmed their lamps. Now, this is surprising because Jesus says in the very beginning of the parable that five of these bride maids are wise and five are foolish. We're looking for indicators. Which is which? But from the way they're acting so far, we can't tell the wise from the foolish. And perhaps they're like the Israelites in our first lesson. In that lesson, Joshua gives a great speech about how God has brought the people of Israel out of Egypt and across the wilderness. He says how God has brought Israel into the promised land, driving out all of the enemies. Then Joshua challenges the people by saying, "Choose this day who you will serve." And even as the people are thinking about it, as they're pandering, "Should we choose the idols in this land or should we choose to serve the true and living God," Joshua hits them with this declaration: "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." I think all of the bridesmaids are committed to serving the Lord. All of the bridesmaids are committed to their faith. All of the bridesmaids are committed to meeting the groom.

At this point in the story, we cannot tell those who are wise from those who are foolish. And even here, I think Jesus is telling us something. That while he is away, we should not spend our time trying to figure out who are the faithful and who are not. Who is worthy to be in the kingdom and who is not. We all get up in the morning and have breakfast. Cereal is my favorite. But we all struggle and hustle our way of trying to earn a living. We all look through various lenses of life and various world views that have been shaped by our experiences and histories because we're all trying to make meaning in our lives. And we really don't have time to try and figure out who is going to heaven and who is not.

Now, in one of my past lives, I was a member of the Pentecostal Church. And as a good Pentecostal, I saw the world in binary terms. You're either saved or you're not. I judge people by how they acted, by what they drank, and who they loved. It made me spiritually proud because I prayed every day and I fasted every week. But let me tell you something, being a judge of other people is exhausting. When I came to know the grace of God that we have in Jesus Christ, when I came to understand that Jesus has done all the work of my salvation and I no longer had to work my way into heaven, when I came to know the love that Jesus has for me and the love that he has for the entire world, it was like a burden being lifted off my shoulders. I was able to exhale. I no longer had to judge people. Instead, I learned to love people and to love people just as they are. I stop judging others and I stop judging myself.

As a Presbyterian, I have come to realize that we are all sinners in need of God's grace and we have the grace and so much more through the love of Jesus Christ. It's not our job to determine who's in or who's out of the kingdom. Instead, we are called to rest when we are tired, respond to God's call when we hear it, and let our light shine when we are asked. And here is where the distinction is made between the wise and the foolish bridesmaids. It's all about the oil. The wise bridesmaids had an extra container of oil. They didn't just bring enough, they brought extra. They were prepared for the long haul. They knew what time the bridegroom was supposed to arrive, just in case, they brought some extra oil. They knew how things were supposed to go, but just in case, they brought some extra oil. The word resilience is tossed around a lot these days, and resilience is the ability to bounce back from a catastrophic situation. There are at least two ways that this can be accomplished. One is through diversity. If you only plant corn, and I know a lot of ya'll plant corn. But if you only plant corn and the corn eating bug arrives, they will destroy all of your crops. But if you plant wheat and you plant corn and the corn eating bug arrives, well at least you can save your wheat harvest and perhaps save enough for the harvest of the day. The other way resilience works is through redundancy. This means having more than what is required in case a sudden loss occurs to a portion of your resources. And this is what the wise bridesmaids experienced by taking more than what they needed. When others ran out, they had enough to get it through the night. Now, as we experience COVID and live further into this pandemic, many congregations are facing financial crises, because they didn't have enough resources saved to face the difficult situation. But many other congregations do have enough, they do have savings, and they do have endowments. But they just don't want to spend them. They say, "This is the rainy day fund." And friends, as your presbytery, leader, I'm here to tell you, it's raining right now, spend the resources.

I try and imagine why the foolish bridesmaids don't have oil. Perhaps they didn't have time to buy the oil. There were so many other tasks to do, and unlike my MBA, life happened, and they just didn't get around to it. Or maybe they were just used to borrowing oil from others. You know those kind of people, they never have a pen, they always need to borrow a couple of dollars from you. They're the neighbor who wants to borrow your ladder or your leaf blower. Perhaps they had a habit of borrowing and when the time came, they just fell back on that old habit. But it didn't work this time. Or perhaps some thought they just didn't need oil, they assume life will continue just as it always has been. Perhaps these five foolish bridesmaids are like those of us who didn't plan on that sudden diagnosis from the doctor. Or those of us who didn't see the breakup of a relationship coming and never imagined the destruction of a flood or fire.

Now this will be a perfect text to preach for an insurance agent like I was in one of my previous lives. But I think God is saying to all of us, that there is a way to be a faithful disciple while we wait for Jesus. Don't do the minimum. Don't do the least possible. But be a committed disciple of Jesus Christ. There is an oil that we need for a changing

church, a church that has to endure multiple crises of COVID and racism. The reality is racial-ethnic diversity is sweeping across the nation. And I am a leader of a Christian denomination that is 89% white. We are totally out of step with the nation. To prepare for the changing church, I'm pushing anti-racism training and teaching about white privilege. I'm encouraging congregations to interact with black churches and churches of color in their communities. I'm encouraging congregations to choose women and people of color in leadership, especially pastoral leadership. I'm encouraging sessions in the presbytery to read the apology document that was passed by our presbytery in February and talk with your congregations about it.

This is the oil of preparation we are putting in our flask. These are the flasks of oil we need for the journey. These are the flasks of oil we need to have as we actively wait for Jesus to return. Plan your future. Be like the wise bridesmaids and prepare for the long journey. And when Jesus returns, he will welcome you. He will welcome all of us into the wedding banquet. Amen.