

## ***Putting Our Hearts To the Test***

1 Thessalonians 4:13-19, Matthew 25:1-13

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Sitting on the Mount of Olives, surrounded by his disciples, Jesus is preaching another sermon. But unlike the Sermon on the Mount, this sermon is different. Its words are directed to the disciples, those who have followed Jesus to the end. Its context, too, is different: it comes as he has entered Jerusalem, prepared to die. Jesus gathers the disciples and begins preaching about what will happen next.

And his words, frankly, are frightening.

Jesus has not packed his sermon with crowd-pleasing stories and anecdotes. His words are sharp, filled with warnings of war and rumors of wars, bold words of caution like “beware,” and “they will hand you over to be tortured.” His words are filled with images of apocalyptic doom and caution. He tells them to be awake and alert, even as the “birth pangs” of the culmination of history begin.

You know, the sort of sermon Presbyterians expect to hear every Sunday.

The technical term for all of this is eschatology, or the theology of the last days. This is the kind of stuff that gets some believers all riled up. There are some who read their Bibles with their calendars next to them, circling dates, noting signs, keeping track of anything that would indicate Jesus’ imminent return.

That would soon become a problem, as we hear in Paul’s words to the Thessalonians. First Thessalonians is the oldest book in the New Testament, and was written decades before Matthew. It’s clear that Jesus’ delay in returning has become as big a problem as airport delays around the holidays. God’s people appear to be milling around like passengers at a gate – unsure of what is happening, weary of waiting, becoming more and more impatient with every passing minute.

Ever watch a parent of a two-year-old try to keep their child engaged while they are waiting in an airport? This is the dilemma Jesus poses to the disciples, and it remains a challenge for us: what does it mean to live with hope and faithfulness?

“The bridegroom was delayed,” Jesus tells the disciples. For a man who was never married, and as far as we know, never officiated at a wedding, Jesus seems to know a lot of wedding stories. He’s told stories about the poor behavior of guests who either don’t show up to the

wedding party at all or who don't bother to get dressed up. John's Gospel tells the story of Jesus going to a wedding in Cana, only to be cornered by his mother when the wedding host runs out of wine. And here, right before he will be handed over to be executed, Jesus tells us a parable of what happens when the groom does not get to the party on time.

Gather any group of pastors and pretty soon you'll hear wild tales of weddings gone wrong: drunk groomsmen, fainting grooms, overbearing parents, overstressed brides. We know a thing or two because we have seen a thing or two.

One of the more memorable weddings we have hosted at Woodlawn Chapel was a ceremony for two Washington University graduate students who were from Kenya. They were lovely young people who happened to be Presbyterian and wanted to be married in a Presbyterian Church. Everything was perfectly planned, or so I thought. About 30 minutes before the wedding, I noticed that no one was here. I checked with Jenny Hughes, who was helping as a wedding coordinator. "Anyone here?" Jenny shook her head. I checked back five minutes before the wedding was supposed to begin and found that a few were sitting in the sanctuary. No one else was here—no bride, no groom, no wedding party. When twenty minutes passed and still no one had shown up, their friends said to me, "You've never done a wedding for an African couple have you. Don't worry. They'll be here...just not on North American time! And when they indeed showed up, a full limousine of friends and guests all singing and dancing in their native language. They arrived late for their own wedding they were only about 45 minutes late to their own wedding.

So perhaps most preachers are not surprised when we hear Jesus say, "the bridegroom was delayed."

Of course, like anything else associated with a wedding, delays are at best anxiety-provoking. In Jesus' time, this behavior would have been scandalous. The central feature of any wedding at that time was the symbolic bringing of the bride to the groom's house. The bride would wear her finest clothes, fully adorned with jewels. Upon her arrival, the wedding party would begin with much joyfulness and celebration – often lasting more than a week.

A groom who was delayed was unthinkable. But that is hardly the only odd thing about this story. There is no bride, for one thing, and even the groom is absent for a good portion of the story. And the bridesmaids chosen by the bride are a strange bunch themselves: if the five foolish ones are some of your best friends, maybe it's time to evaluate your life choices. Just saying.

Five of the women had managed to grab few extra necessities on their way out the door. Their bags were filled with extra snacks, a couple of water bottles, and a few flasks of oil – why? Why not? Just in case.

The other five didn't seem to care, or at least were more interested in the party itself than performing their roles. But as Jesus continues the story, it becomes evident that the point is not about being prepared – this is not the parable of the Boy Scout who gets married. Instead, it is a story about who is wise, and who is foolish.

We can see where this is going. The disciples, in fact, could see how this was going to turn out. The hours go by, and the groom fails to appear. It gets so late that the entire wedding party begins to nod off. As the lamps burn down, suddenly someone shouts that the groom is arriving. They all get up and trim their lamps, but the foolish ones discover they are about to run out of oil. Panicked, they try to borrow some oil from the others, but they tell them they won't have enough. "You had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves," the wise ones say. Sure, because, you know, there was probably a 24-hour Wal Mart around the corner. They're facing a real oil shortage.

So off they go – only to be locked out when they return. They were foolish to believe that they could get what they needed when the hour turns late.

There were ten bridesmaids...five who were foolish, and five who were wise.

Jesus is offering the disciples – offering us – a reminder of what the life of faith is all about. His description of the bridesmaids is a reminder of where the parable intersects with our lives. Jesus is reminding us that being wise is more than a matter of planning ahead. Here, says Jesus are reminders of two ways of living: wise and foolish. Being wise means remembering that even as the hour grows late, even as the difficulties of the world mount, even as we grow weary and fall asleep, our hope is shaped by the wisdom of the cross.

Jesus calls us to be wise. Listen to what Jesus is saying, not only to the disciples, but to the church today: be sure to be people who are wise. Remember his story about the man who had failed to create a strong foundation for his house, choosing to build on sand instead? Remember the foolish ones who did not respond to the invitation to the banquet? Or the foolish ones who placed stumbling blocks before the little ones, who rejected the faith of children?

Wisdom is the way the church allows its lamps to shine in the world. It is the connection between believing in God and living that faith in the everyday world. Wisdom takes shape in acts of justice, kindness, compassion, mercy. Wisdom is rooted in the hope of God's love. Wisdom dares to pray: thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Here is the reason we wear blue jeans to church. We do it not only because it is comfortable, but because it is a sign of our commitment to work, to be ready, to be wise. Perhaps the five foolish ones forgot the reason they were invited: to offer their gifts to the bridegroom.

That is the message the parable offers us today: be thankful and be wise as you offer yourselves to God.

Wisdom, reminds our Presbyterian statement of faith, is the Spirit's gift of courage that allows us to "pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silence, to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace...to live holy and joyful lives even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth. Wisdom gathers the oil to make sure the lamps stay burning.

This is our responsibility as a community of faith. Jesus calls us to pursue wisdom so that we might stay away, allowing God's light to shine through our lives. Amen.