

Jim Gill

November 12, 2017

"Ready"

Joshua 24:1-3a 14-25 Matthew 25:1-13 | Thessalonians 4:13-18

INTRODUCTION TO JOSHUA 24:

Joshua has gotten his people across the Jordan. They've fit the battle of Jericho. They conquer kingdom after kingdom and distribute the lands among the 12 tribes of Israel. This is Joshua's "line-in-the-sand" "here-I-stand-where-do-you-stand" moment. If we were to read further we would read that after this challenge Joshua dies at the age of 110 years old and is buried in the Promised Land. Hear the word of the Lord from Joshua 24:1-3; and 14-25

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 25:1-13

For American weddings the emphasis is on the bride. The bride's family foots the bill and the groom pays for the rehearsal dinner and gets a little chocolate cake. In my son's case the groom's cake was in the shape of a bar-b-que cooker.

In the Eastern culture of Jesus' day, the bridegroom was more important than the bride. The bridegroom is the one who paid for all the expenses of the wedding. He paid for both cakes and everything else. In today's gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable about a Jewish wedding of his day. Hear the Word of the Lord from the gospel of our Lord, from Matthew 25:1-13

Let us pray. Lord, open our eyes to see your truth. Open our ears to hear your voice. Open our minds to receive your word. Open our hearts, our souls, and our spirits to respond with our lives. Amen.

There once was a little boy who was about to attend worship for his first time at another church. That church had a plaque in their welcome center honoring those who had made the ultimate sacrifice in serving their country-- like the one we have in our Welcome Center. The little boy pointed to the plaque and asked what it was for. A person said, "That's for those who died in the service." The little boy refused to go in. He said, "I'm not ready to go."

The power of Jesus' parables is that even though they were all set in the first century world, they have perfect twenty-first century application--both in terms of resonance and relevance. Granted, today's parable talks about strange wedding traditions, midnight processions, a late bridegroom, and nearly a dozen dozing bridesmaids, but the whole situation Jesus described is perfectly understandable to any twenty-first century person. After all, the parable is really all about an energy crisis--an oil shortage...

Jesus' parable about a wedding is told not from the vantage point of the bride or groom, but of the ten young maidens who had been invited to the happy occasion. Five of them were foolish, said Jesus, five of them were wise. What

was the measure of their wisdom? In a word, it is their willingness to be ready to be a part of the event. All of the young women had oil in their lamps, but only five had an additional supply.

This is, of course, foreign to our concepts of weddings today. Today we even have a reality show called *Bridezillas!* Weddings in our society are announced for a specific time and place, and if things are late in getting started, those invited guests begin to fidget a bit.

J. Alexander Findley tells of what he observed during a trip to Palestine: "When we were approaching the gates of a town I caught sight of ten maidens beautifully dressed playing some kind of musical instrument as they danced along the road in front of our car. When I asked what they were doing, (my guide) told me that they were going to keep the bride company till the bridegroom arrived. I asked him if there was any chance of seeing the wedding, but he shook his head, saying in effect: 'It might be tonight, or tomorrow night, or in a fortnight's time; nobody ever knows for certain.' Then he went on to explain that one of the great things to do, if you could, at a middleclass wedding in Palestine was to catch the bridal party napping. So the bridegroom comes unexpectedly, and sometimes in the middle of the night." (1)

In first century Palestine, you were invited, but there was not a specific time for the wedding. A wedding could happen anytime within several days. The uncertainty was considered a part of the excitement of the wedding. The bridegroom hoped to catch some of the bridal party napping. That was the fun of it, the anticipation, and the surprise of when the celebration would actually take place. But fairness required that some announcement be made, so just before the big event a messenger was sent through the streets either blowing a trumpet or shouting: Behold the bridegroom comes." (singing) "Here comes the bride...groom") The alert ones in the wedding party would respond, and the others would be left out.

You see, a Jewish wedding had three stages. First, there was the formal engagement/betrothal which was almost always arranged by the parents of the future bride and groom. Later (up to a year or more) came the formal religious ceremony in the bride's home. This was a religious service similar to our wedding service. Thirdly, there was the wedding banquet, generally held at night, at the house of the groom. This banquet generally lasted about seven days.

The banquet could take place right after the ceremony or weeks later. It was an elaborate affair that was very expensive. It was, therefore, a social event to which their friends were anxious to attend. The bridegroom would come to get his bride and they would walk together to the wedding. As the bride and the groom walked down the street their bridesmaids would take part in the 'welcoming ceremony' by lighting the way with lamps held by the wedding party. It would be a major embarrassment for anyone in the wedding party not to be by the road ready to welcome the bridegroom and bride.

The first thing this parable suggests is that there are some things that can't be borrowed. Many years ago when I was an Associate Pastor at St. Andrew's Presbyterian I had placed an ad for a youth director on the bulletin board at UH. I'll never forget one respondent. She had a strong accent that told me she was not a native English speaker. As I talked to her on the phone I asked her what her church background was and she said, "Oh I'm not a Christian." I responded, "Well we are a Christian church and we would want a person who would be working with our youth to model and share the Christian faith with our youth. She paused a moment and then she said, "My brother-in-law is a Christian."

We can't depend on someone else's faith. Your parents cannot walk it for you. Husbands cannot depend upon the devotion of their wives or vice versa. You can't depend on your brother-in-law's faith to get you a job as a Presbyterian youth director.

Faith is the most intensely personal experience we will ever have in life. Others can help us toward it. They can encourage us. They can pray for us. They can, bring us up in the way we should go, but in the end, we must embrace it for ourselves.

The five foolish maidens in this story were foolish because they thought that they could rely upon the resources of others to get them through. What they discovered was that there are some things in life that cannot be borrowed.

The second thing this parable suggests is that there are some things that cannot be put off until the last moment.

The late Lewis Grizzard, a humorist and author of many columns and books, was by his minister in the hospital. Grizzard was scheduled to have open-heart surgery the next morning. He confessed to his minister that he had not exactly been a paragon of virtue and asked if there were still time to repent. The minister looked at his watch and replied, "Yes, but I'd hurry if I were you." (2)

There are some things you just can't put off. Yet, it is amazing to me how so many fail to grasp this concept when it comes to life's decisions. How many folks are there who never bother to darken the doorstep of a church but when problems come and they are panicked, they rush to the church because they see religion as the last hope. My friends, you cannot make withdrawals until and unless you have first made some deposits.

Why is it that we so often put life's important decisions off until the last moment? Jesus said that it is because we are foolish. It is not that the foolish maidens lacked any desire. They genuinely wanted to go and participate in the celebration. It is just that they gave it insufficient forethought. All too often we

believe that heaven can wait. Yet, it is the wise person who does not put off the matter of eternity to the end.

The third thing this parable suggests to us is that, if we are not ready, we can miss out on great opportunities. We can fall asleep.

I came across a Letterman Top Ten list of things to say if you are caught sleeping at your desk. I'm not going to repeat them all, but for example, Excuse Number 10 was, "They told me at the blood bank this might happen." Another was "Whew, I must have left the top off the White Out! You got here just in time!" The #1 best thing to say if you get caught napping at your desk was "...., Amen."

We don't want to be caught asleep at our desk or even worse, asleep at the wheel. The issue here is one of readiness when the bridegroom comes.

Now, I will be the first one to admit that this theme of Jesus' return has been abused over the years. As I've told you before, in 1973 I was one of the founding members of the "Bachelor till the Rapture Club." But by 1975 Jesus' hadn't returned and ...I met Anne and I revoked my membership. For the last 41 years I've been a card carrying member of the "Wed till I'm Dead" club-- OR till Jesus comes for us all.

As Christians we hold to Jesus' promise that he will return. We believe that at any moment he could return. It is also true that at any moment we could make a wrong turn or too sharp a turn and we could go to him.

I've spoken before about what happened to me in November of 1983 when I was broadsided by an 18 wheeler at 60 miles an hour on Highway 59. My 4 month old son Andrew came through without a scratch, and I had four broken ribs, and a cracked skull. I was ready to go ... but didn't.

In 1999 Anne discovered a melanoma on my left temple. In the 2 weeks' time it took to schedule my surgery it grew from the size of a dime to a nickel. When the surgeon came out afterward he said the lesion was .4 millimeters from getting its traveling papers to go anywhere it wanted to in my body. I was ready to go ... but didn't.

Yesterday I participated in the Boot Walk at M.D. Anderson. I looked for Tonnia, but we never found each other. There were 4,000 walkers and at one point they announced that \$900,000 had been raised for Cancer research. Some of those walking were in memory of friends and family who had died. Some of those walking were in support of people fighting Cancer. One T-shirt I really liked said, "Friends Don't Let Friends Fight Cancer Alone." Tonnia told me last Sunday that on Wednesday of this week she would ring the bell at MD Anderson signaling she was through with her chemotherapy and on Thursday she started a new job. She's ready to go, but hasn't.

This morning we gave thanks for those veterans who came forward and at one point in their lives said, "Yes," when asked to serve their country. Some of them may have seen friends of their make the ultimate sacrifice. Some of you may have family or friends that made that sacrifice. I assume that there is something about combat that makes one get ready and stay ready.

Last Sunday a group of believers gathered for worship and a gunman broke into their sanctuary and started shooting. It was not God's will that their lives be taken. It was human willfulness—not only on the part of the gunman who took their lives and then took his own, but also on the part of those who were not ready to take action any number of times that could have prevented it from happening, and those who are still not ready to take steps to see to it that these tragic, senseless killings will not continue.

Friday Night I went to hear George Ensle at Anderson Fair. It was a CD release party for his newest project called Retrospective, a collection of 12 songs from his 50 years of recording and touring and sharing his musical gifts. He was in town to be honored at Rice University for his contribution to the arts and to store his music in an archive of Texas Folk Music. Friday night after the concert I got to visit with him and he shared that the next day, Saturday, yesterday he was to sing for a concert at the Community Center in Sutherland Springs for the victims and survivors of last Sunday's massacre. He was at a loss as to what songs to play. I asked if I could pray for him and he said, "Yes." I prayed that God would give him the words to say and just the right songs to sing to bring comfort to those gathered there. Today as we worship now, hundreds are gathering at the baseball field to ... worship.

Joshua's famous last words were in essence, "I don't know about you, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." When your time comes, whether it's Jesus coming for all of us who are still alive... or whether it's time for you or me to go to him, ... my prayer is that you and I will have spent our lives ...and...died... in the service....of our Lord....because we were ... ready.

Let's pray O God we are grateful for the veterans who have given so much in the service of our country, especially of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice, who gave their lives.

It makes us mindful of the ultimate sacrifice Jesus gave for each of us and how we are called to respond with grateful and cheerful hearts.

This week in Sutherland Springs we have witnessed yet another tragedy where lives were not given but taken. We pray that rather than resign ourselves to prayers and flags at half-mast alone that we will pray AND work to correct those things that allow such heinous acts to continue. Give us the same courage and resolve to put an end to domestic violence that we have had to oppose violence between nations that call men and women to the armed services that we honor

this day. May we work as intentionally to defend our citizens from our citizens, as we work to defend our country from other countries.

Last week our prayers focused on all the saints who have gone before us into their heavenly reward. Hear us as we lift up those who gave their lives in service to our country, and those who served who have since gone to be with our Lord.

Amen.

(1) J. Alexander Findley

(2) Lewis Grizzard.