

“ARE YOU READY?”

**A SERMON BASED ON MATTHEW’S GOSPEL (25:1:13)
AND PRESENTED AT ORLEAN UMC ON NOVEMBER 9,
2014**

**LIFE IS FULL OF DEADLINES..... WHEN APRIL 15TH
ROLLS AROUND, THE TAXES HAVE TO BE PAID, OR AT
VERY LEAST YOU’LL NEED TO FILE FOR AN
EXTENSION..... YOU HAVE TASKS FOR WORK THAT
YOUR SUPERVISOR EXPECTS WILL BE DONE IN A
TIMELY MANNER..... YOUR CREDIT CARD BILL
ARRIVES IN THE MAIL, AND IT NEEDS TO BE PAID ON
TIME LEST YOU INCUR A LATE FEE AND INTEREST
CHARGES..... CHRISTMAS IS COMING, AND THE
PRESENTS YOU PLAN TO PURCHASE FOR YOUR FAMILY
OUGHT TO BE PURCHASED BEFORE DECEMBER 25
SHOWS UP.**

WE ARE USED TO LIVES WITH DEADLINES..... AND SO WE WON'T HAVE ANY DIFFICULTY RELATING TO THE MOTHER OF ALL DEADLINES THAT JESUS DESCRIBES IN THE GOSPEL FOR TODAY, THE PARABLE OF THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS..... JESUS' PARABLE IS DESIGNED TO GET US THINKING ABOUT THAT DAY IN THE FUTURE -----OR MIGHT IT BE TODAY OR PERHAPS IT MIGHT BE TOMORROW -----WHEN HE RETURNS TO BRING ALL HIS SAINTS HOME IN TRIUMPH TO HEAVEN..... OF ALL THE DEADLINES IN OUR LIFE, THIS IS THE ONE DEADLINE FOR WHICH WE DARE NOT BE FOUND UNPREPARED!

JESUS DOESN'T WANT TO FIND US UNPREPARED, AND SO WE OUGHT TO ASK OURSELVES A SEARCHING AND IMPORTANT QUESTION AS WE STUDY THIS PARABLE.

THE QUESTION GOD'S WORD ADDRESSES TO YOUR

HEARTS THIS MORNING IS THIS: ARE YOU READY FOR

JESUS' RETURN?

**THROUGHOUT MY CALL AND SEMINARY EDUCATION -----
THROUGH INTERACTIONS WITH COLLEAGUES AND
PEERS AND PROBABLY EVIDENT TO YOU IN THE
HUNDREDS OF SERMONS THAT I HAVE PREPARED -----I
HAVE CONSISTENTLY SEEN THE VALUE IN USING OR
EMPLOYING ILLUSTRATIONS IN MY PREACHING AND MY
TEACHING.....**

FOR IF PEOPLE DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT I AM TRYING TO SAY OR THE TEACHING THAT I AM TRYING TO CONVEY OR MOST IMPORTANTLY THE MESSAGE THAT GOD HAS REVEALED TO US THROUGH HIS WORD BY SIMPLY EXPLAINING IT DIRECTLY, SOMETIMES AN ILLUSTRATION FROM EVERYDAY LIFE COULD COMMUNICATE THE POINT MORE CLEARLY.

AND THAT IS WHAT JESUS DOES IN TODAY'S GOSPEL. TALK ABOUT THE END OF TIME AND ETERNAL LIFE IS HARD FOR TERMINAL HUMAN BEINGS TO UNDERSTAND. SO JESUS TELLS A STORY THAT RELATES THE POINT IN EVERYDAY TERMS.

THE EVERYDAY TERMS JESUS USES AREN'T FROM OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD, BUT FROM THE JEWISH WORLD THAT WAS CONTEMPORARY TO JESUS AND HIS FOLLOWERS..... JESUS' PARABLE OF THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS FEEDS FROM A COMMON CULTURAL CUSTOM AMONG FIRST CENTURY JEWS..... WHEN A COUPLE BECAME ENGAGED, THERE WAS A LEGAL BETROTHAL CEREMONY THAT TOOK PLACE, OFFICIALLY UNITING THE COUPLE AS HUSBAND AND WIFE..... BUT THE COUPLE DID NOT LIVE TOGETHER AS HUSBAND AND WIFE RIGHT AWAY. SOME SET TIME LATER, THERE WAS A FORMAL PROCESSIONAL WHERE THE HUSBAND AND HIS GROOMSMEN LEFT HIS HOUSE, ARRIVED AT THE BRIDE'S HOME, AND LED THE BRIDE AND HER BRIDESMAIDS TO THE GROOM'S HOME.

**THERE WAS A BANQUET, AND THEN THE COUPLE
BEGAN THEIR NEW LIVES TOGETHER..... THIS WAS THE
CUSTOM JESUS USED IN HIS PARABLE TO ILLUSTRATE
HIS POINT AND TO GET HIS LISTENERS TO ASK
THEMSELVES IF THEY WERE READY FOR HIS RETURN.**

**THE TEN VIRGINS JESUS MENTIONS IN THE PARABLE
WOULD BE THE BRIDESMAIDS FROM OUR
PERSPECTIVE..... WHEN THE GROOM ARRIVED TO
BRING HIS BRIDE HOME, THEY WERE GOING TO
ACCOMPANY THE PROCESSION TO THE GROOM'S
HOUSE..... JESUS SAID THAT HALF OF THEM WERE
WISE AND HALF WERE FOOLISH, BECAUSE HALF OF
THEM WERE PREPARED FOR A LONG NIGHT OF WAITING
AND THE OTHER HALF WERE NOT.**

FIVE OF THEM BROUGHT OIL TO KEEP THEIR TORCHES LIT INTO THE EVENING, BUT THE OTHER FIVE DIDN'T BRING ANY EXTRA OIL WITH THEM.

YOU CAN PROBABLY FIGURE OUT THAT THE TEN VIRGINS DESCRIBE PEOPLE WHO ARE WAITING FOR THE RETURN OF JESUS, THE BRIDEGROOM IN THE PARABLE..... BUT WHAT ABOUT THE OIL-WHAT DOES THAT STAND FOR? THEOLOGIANS HAVE SPECULATED WHAT JESUS HAD IN MIND..... DID THE OIL STAND FOR THE WORD OF GOD, OR FAITH, OR THE HOLY SPIRIT, OR MAYBE ALL OF THE ABOVE? -----WE DON'T KNOW FOR SURE, BUT WHAT WE CAN SEE FROM THE START IS THAT JESUS IS CONCERNED ABOUT PEOPLE WHO THINK THEY ARE READY FOR HIS RETURN, BUT REALLY AREN'T.

YOU CAN SEE THE FATAL CONSEQUENCES FROM A FAILURE TO PREPARE FOR JESUS' RETURN AS YOU FOLLOW THE FIVE FOOLISH VIRGINS IN THE PARABLE.

THE BRIDEGROOM TOOK A LONG TIME TO ARRIVE. IN FACT, THE ARRIVAL DIDN'T HAPPEN UNTIL THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. AND SO THE BRIDESMAIDS STARTED TO NOD OFF LIKE TIRED TRAVELERS TRYING TO GET SLEEP ON AN AIRPLANE. FINALLY, THE ANNOUNCEMENT SOUNDED. THE GROOM WAS ON HIS WAY! THE SLEEPY VIRGINS WOKE UP AND TRIMMED THEIR LAMPS. MUCH LIKE THE BURNT WICK OF A CANDLE, THEIR TORCHES NEEDED TO HAVE THE BURNT WICKS REMOVED.

THEN THEY APPLIED MORE OIL TO THEIR TORCHES AND THEY HAD LIGHT AGAIN...EXCEPT FOR HALF OF THEM.

THE FOOLISH FIVE WILL CALL THEM ----FORGOT TO BRING EXTRA OIL, AND THE WISE FIVE COULDN'T SHARE THEIR PERSONAL SUPPLY WITH THE OTHERS BECAUSE THERE WASN'T ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE..... THAT POINT IN THE PARABLE IS A REMINDER THAT EACH PERSON BELIEVES IN JESUS FOR HIMSELF OR HERSELF. YOU CAN'T BELIEVE FOR SOMEONE ELSE. A WIFE CAN'T BELIEVE FOR HER HUSBAND. A PARENT CAN'T BELIEVE FOR A CHILD. A PERSON CAN'T BELIEVE FOR HIS FRIEND OR NEIGHBOR.

EACH INDIVIDUAL PERSON NEEDS TO BE READY FOR
JESUS TO RETURN, AND NO ONE ELSE CAN PREPARE
ANOTHER PERSON FOR THAT DAY.

THE FOOLISH FIVE LIVED TO REGRET THEIR DECISION. I'M NOT SURE WHERE THEY EXPECTED TO FIND OIL SELLERS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, BUT THEIR UNPREPARED SITUATION SENT THEM TO DO JUST THAT..... AND BY THE TIME THEY RETURNED AND ARRIVED AT THE COUPLE'S HOME, THE DOOR WAS LOCKED. THE BANQUET HAD BEGUN. THE PLACES AT THE TABLE WERE TAKEN. THE LATECOMERS HAD NO ROOM, AND THEY HAD NO ONE TO BLAME BUT THEMSELVES.

**“‘SIR, SIR,’ THEY SAID, ‘OPEN THE DOOR FOR US!’ BUT
THE GROOM REPLIED, ‘I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, I DON’T
KNOW YOU.’” AND WITH THAT, JESUS ENDS THE STORY
WITH THIS SOBER WARNING: “THEREFORE, KEEP
WATCH, BECAUSE YOU DO NOT KNOW THE DAY OR THE
HOUR.”**

**THE WAY THAT JESUS TOLD THIS STORY WASN’T
EXACTLY TRUE-TO-LIFE. THE VIRGINS OR BRIDESMAIDS
PROBABLY WOULD HAVE BEEN WAITING WITH THE
BRIDE, NOT WAITING SOMEPLACE ELSE TO JOIN THE
GROOM ON THE WAY TO MEET HIS BRIDE. THE GROOM
WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SO LATE AS TO ARRIVE IN THE
MIDDLE OF A DARK NIGHT, AND LATECOMERS TO THE
BANQUET WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN LOCKED OUT.**

**BUT JESUS DIDN'T TELL THIS PARABLE TO GIVE US
INSIGHTS INTO ANCIENT JEWISH CULTURE. JESUS TOLD
THIS PARABLE TO GIVE US INSIGHTS INTO OUR
SPIRITUAL PREPARATION FOR HIS RETURN. AND
HERE'S THE QUESTION EVERY PERSON, YES, EVEN
EVERY CHRISTIAN NEEDS TO HEAR: ARE YOU READY
FOR CHRIST'S RETURN?**

**I THINK ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING POINTS OF THIS
PARABLE IS THAT IT IS REALLY DIRECTED AT
CHRISTIANS. JESUS' WORDS ARE NOT AIMED AT THE
UNBELIEVING WORLD, BUT AT PEOPLE WHO SAY THAT
THEY ARE READY FOR JESUS TO RETURN. ALL TEN
VIRGINS EXPECTED THE GROOM TO ARRIVE, BUT NOT
ALL TEN WERE READY.**

AND THE CONCLUSION OF THE PARABLE SOUNDED A LOT LIKE SOMETHING ELSE JESUS SAID IN AN EARLIER SECTION OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL:

“NOT EVERYONE WHO SAYS TO ME, ‘LORD, LORD,’ WILL ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN” (MATTHEW 7:21).

WHY WOULD JESUS WARN BELIEVERS ABOUT BEING READY FOR HIS RETURN WHEN THERE ARE SO MANY OTHERS IN OUR WORLD TODAY WHO DON'T BELIEVE IN JESUS AND WHO CERTAINLY ARE NOT READY FOR HIS RETURN? IT'S NOT THAT JESUS ISN'T CONCERNED ABOUT THE LOST. BUT IN THIS SPECIFIC SECTION AND IN THIS SPECIFIC PARABLE, JESUS IS CONCERNED THAT THE FOUND DO NOT BECOME LOST AGAIN.

HE IS CONCERNED WITH THE SPIRITUAL COMPLACENCY AND SHORT-SIGHTEDNESS THAT SAYS, "I KNOW JESUS IS MY SAVIOR. I'M GOOD TO GO. I'LL COAST MY WAY INTO HEAVEN."

I WILL GO SO FAR AS TO SAY THAT THIS SPIRITUAL SHORT-SIGHTEDNESS IS ALIVE AND WELL-----! FOR EXAMPLE -----JUST CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING: IN OUR CHURCH BODY, AND WE ARE A SMALL CHURCH WITH A RICH AND LOVING HISTORY -----A COUNTRY CHURCH THAT TAKES PRIDE IN THE FACT THAT WE HOLD FIRMLY AND FAITHFULLY TO ALL OF WHAT GOD'S WORD HAS TO SAY, -----WE AVERAGE ONLY ABOUT 31% OF OUR CONFIRMED MEMBERSHIP IN CHURCH ON A GIVEN SUNDAY.....JUST 31%-----

AND AMONG THAT 31% ARE SOME PEOPLE WHO COME WEEKLY..... SOME WHO COME EVERY OTHER WEEK, SOME WHO COME MONTHLY..... AND SOME WHO COME EVEN LESS.....

AND EVEN THOUGH PART OF THE 69% NOT IN CHURCH MAY HAVE A GOOD REASON — SUCH AS ILLNESS, HOMEBOUND ELDERLY MEMBERS, TRAVEL OUT OF TOWN, FAMILY EMERGENCY, SCHEDULE CONFLICTS OR WELL DESERVED VACATIONS — IT IS ALSO SAFE TO SAY THAT AT LEAST A PART OF THE GROUP THAT ISN'T HERE CHOOSES CONVENIENCE OVER CHRIST..... IT MAY BE SUNDAY BRUNCH, IT MAY BE SLEEPING IN, IT MAY BE A DAY AT THE BEACH, IT MAY BE PROJECTS AROUND THE HOME,

**OR IT MAY BE SOMETHING ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT,
BUT WHAT IT REALLY IS, IS SPIRITUAL SHORT-
SIGHTEDNESS. JUST AS THE FOOLISH VIRGINS
WEREN'T PREPARED FOR A LONG NIGHT OF WAITING
AND WATCHING..... WE CAN LOOSE SIGHT OF THE FACT
THAT WE NEED TO KEEP OUR FAITH WELL-FUELED AND
BURNING BRIGHTLY DURING THE LONG WAITING AND
WATCHING THAT COMES BEFORE JESUS' RETURN.**

**YOU DON'T WANT TO HEAR THE BRIDEGROOM BEHIND A
LOCKED DOOR SAY, "I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, I DON'T
KNOW YOU." BUT THE SPIRITUAL COMPLACENCY THAT
FAILS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF EVERY REASONABLE
OPPORTUNITY TO CONNECT TO THE WORD OF GOD IS
FLIRTING WITH THAT VERY PROSPECT.**

ARE YOU READY FOR HIS RETURN?

JUST HEARING THE QUESTION AND THINKING ABOUT AN HONEST ANSWER SHOULD PUT A LUMP IN OUR THROATS. THE SINFUL SPIRITUAL COMPLACENCY THAT SHOWS UP IN VARIOUS WAYS IS MORE THAN ENOUGH PROOF OF THE SIN THAT RESIDES IN OUR HEARTS AND THE SIN THAT SEPARATES US FROM GOD. WE COULD NEVER BE READY FOR CHRIST'S RETURN EVEN ON OUR BEST DAY.

AND THAT IS WHY HE INTERVENED FOR US. WE COULD NEVER COME FACE-TO-FACE WITH GOD, BUT GOD IN HIS GRACE CAME FACE-TO-FACE WITH THE HUMAN RACE IN THE PERSON OF HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST.

**JESUS' FIRST ORDER OF BUSINESS WAS TO MAKE US
READY BY REMOVING SIN FROM OUR RECORD. IN HIS
INCARNATE LIFE AMONG US ----JESUS CAME FACE-TO-
FACE WITH SATAN'S TEMPTATIONS IN THIS WORLD, AND
HE CAME FACE-TO-FACE WITH OUR SINS ---- PAST—
PRESENT AND FUTURE ----AND ENSURED OUR
FORGIVENESS AND ACCEPTANCE INTO THE KINGDOM
THROUGH HIS DEATH ON THE CROSS..... AND NOW,
RISEN FROM THE DEAD, JESUS DECLARES TO YOU THAT
YOUR SIN HAS BEEN BURIED IN HIS TOMB AND YOU
HAVE RISEN TO NEW SPIRITUAL LIFE. GOD HAS
DECLARED YOU HOLY AND INNOCENT IN HIS EYES. GOD
HAS DONE EVERYTHING TO MAKE YOU RIGHT WITH HIM
NOW SO THAT YOU CAN STAND RIGHTEOUS BEFORE
HIM ON THE LAST DAY.**

**BUT GOD TAKES YOUR SPIRITUAL PREPARATION A
STEP FARTHER..... NOT ONLY DID HE SEND HIS SON TO
WIN YOUR FORGIVENESS, BUT HE SENDS YOU HIS
SPIRIT TO SUSTAIN YOUR FAITH.**

**HIS HOLY SPIRIT IS AT WORK USING THE FORGIVENESS
APPLIED TO YOU THROUGH HIS HOLY WORD AND HOLY
BAPTISM AND HOLY COMMUNION TO SUSTAIN YOU AS
GOD'S HOLY SON OR DAUGHTER.**

**EVEN WHEN YOU AND I ARE TEMPTED TO GET
COMPLACENT WITH OUR SPIRITUAL PREPARATION FOR
JESUS' RETURN, GOD IS NEVER COMPLACENT.....**

**HE WANTS TO SEE YOU PREPARED, AND THAT'S WHY
HE WANTS YOU HERE IN WORSHIP AND STUDY AND
SUNDAY SCHOOL EVERY POSSIBLE MOMENT SO THAT
HE CAN MAKE YOU READY FOR HIS SON'S RETURN.**

**I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THE REST OF YOU, BUT FOR
BETTER OR WORSE, I'M ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO
TENDS TO NOT GET THINGS DONE FAR IN
ADVANCE.....MY INTENTIONS ARE GOOD --- BUT TIME
AND LIFE'S REALITIES SEEM TO SOMETIMES CONSPIRE
AGAINST MY MEAGER EFFORTS AT PREPARATON**

**COMPLETING A WEEKLY SERMON ON TIME IS ONE THING
---- BUT PLANNING A SERMON SERIES OR PREPARING
SERMONS NOW FOR SUNDAY'S DOWN THE ROAD OR
AVOIDING THE LAST MINUTE RUSH TO COMPLETE ALL
OF MY REQUIRED COURSE WORK FOR MY SEMINARY
CLASSES EACH YEAR -----SEEMS TO BE BEYOND MY
GRASP --- AT LEAST AT THIS POINT --**

**I HAVE READ ABOUT A VETERAN PASTOR IN SOUTHERN
CALIFORNIA WHO WRITES HIS SERMONS ABOUT SIX
MONTHS IN ADVANCE! NOW THAT'S PREPARATION!-----
I DOUBT ---- NO I KNOW ---- THAT I WILL NEVER BE THAT
PREPARED!**

WHETHER OR NOT YOU PREPARE FOR YOUR TASKS
WELL IN ADVANCE OR AT THE LAST MINUTE, THERE IS
ONE THING YOU DON'T WANT TO WAIT TO PREPARE
FOR, AND THAT'S CHRIST'S RETURN.

OUR WORSHIP TODAY HAS US IN MIND OF ETERNAL LIFE
IN HEAVEN, AND THAT'S SOMETHING WE DON'T WANT
TO MISS FOR ANY REASON. SO BE READY! BE READY
BY COMING HERE, TO GOD'S HOUSE, SO THAT HE CAN
CONTINUE TO MAKE YOU READY. THEN, WHEN TALK
ABOUT ETERNITY COMES UP, YOU DON'T HAVE TO
WONDER OR WORRY ABOUT WHERE YOU STAND WITH
GOD.

**THEN YOU WILL KNOW THAT JESUS' GRACE FROM HIS
HEART AND THE HOLY SPIRIT'S WORK IN YOUR HEART
HAS MADE YOU READY FOR HIS RETURN.**

**NOW PRAISE GOD.....AND MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU
AND FOR ME.....AMEN**