

“READY OR NOT.....”

**A SERMON BASED ON THE GOSPEL OF
MATTHEW (25:1-13) AND PRESENTED FOR
ORLEAN UMC ON NOVEMBER 8, 2020-----**

**HIDE AND SEEK WAS A FAVORITE PASTIME IN MY
INDIANAPOLIS NEIGHBORHOOD AS I WAS
GROWING UP. OUR NEIGHBORHOOD STREETS
WERE FULL OF THE CHILDREN OF RETURNING
WORLD WAR II VETERANS AND THERE WERE
EASILY TEN CHILDREN OR MORE BETWEEN THE
AGES OF ABOUT SEVEN AND TWELVE ALWAYS
AVAILABLE FOR A ROBUST GAME OF HIDE AND
SEEK ---- DUSK WAS OUR FAVORITE TIME TO
PLAY BECAUSE ONE COULD USE THE DECLINING
LIGHT TO HELP IN OUR QUEST TO BE
STEALTHLIKE AND HIDDEN**

**AND THERE WERE GARAGES---TOOL SHEDS,
SOME FENCED YARDS, AND BACK PATIOS THAT
ALL PROVIDED STELLAR HIDING SPOTS. IN
FACT, SOMETIMES THE PROBLEM WASN'T
FINDING A PLACE TO HIDE, BUT SIMPLY
CHOOSING WHICH SPOT WOULD BE THE RIGHT
ONE THIS TIME.**

**AT THE START OF EACH ROUND WE WOULD
GATHER PRETTY MUCH AT THE CENTER OF
SOME COMMON AREA....MAYBE THE LEADER'S
FRONT YARD OR THE OPEN FIELD THAT WE
USED FOR SPORT AND GAMES AND THE LIKE-----,**

THE COUNTER ----OFTEN THE YOUNGEST AND SMALLEST KID ----- WOULD START COUNTING – 1... 2... 3... 4... 5... – AND THE HIDERS WOULD START HIDING..... THERE WAS ALWAYS A MAD DASH FOR SOME OF THE FAVORITE SPOTS AND NO END TO STRATEGIZING. DID YOU WANT A GREAT SPOT FAR AWAY FROM BASE OR SOMETHING THAT MIGHT BE A LITTLE MORE EXPOSED, BUT WITH A SHORTER RUN? IF YOU WERE INDECISIVE, AS I WAS, YOU MIGHT STILL BE LOOKING WHEN THE COUNTER ANNOUNCED, “48... 49... 50! -----READY OR NOT, HERE I COME!”

“READY OR NOT!”

**THOSE ARE THE WORDS THAT COULD STRIKE
TERROR IN THE HEARTS OF THE UNPREPARED,
THOSE WITH NO PLACE TO HIDE, NO COVER
CHOSEN FOR THIS ROUND OF THE GAME.**

**I CAN STILL FEEL THE PANIC OF NOT BEING
READY, AND APPARENTLY I'M NOT THE ONLY
ONE WHO HAS THIS SORT OF ANXIETY. THAT
NEED TO FEEL READY, TO FEEL PREPARED CAN
BE A HIGHLY MOTIVATING EMOTION.**

MARKETERS HAVE REALIZED THIS FOR YEARS. MUCH OF ADVERTISING, IF NOT DESIGNED TO MAKE US FEEL LIKE WE ARE INCOMPLETE, IS DESIGNED TO MAKE US FEEL LIKE WE NEED TO BE PREPARED, MUCH OF MARKETING SEEMS TO BE BASED ON MAKING CONSUMERS FEEL LIKE THEY NEED TO BE PREPARED, ULTRA-PREPARED, MAYBE EVEN OVER-PREPARED.

ARE YOU PREPARED FOR SUMMER? TRY THIS DIET TO GET PREPARED.

ARE YOU READY FOR THE BIG GAME? BETTER STOCK UP ON SNACKS SO YOU DON'T RUN OUT.

**WILL YOUR LOVED ONES HAVE EVERYTHING
THEY NEED WHEN YOU ARE GONE? IF YOU NOT
IT'S TIME TO BUY INSURANCE**

**ALL SO THAT YOU ARE READY. SO THAT YOU
ARE PREPARED WHEN THAT IMPORTANT DAY
COMES.**

**ON THE WHOLE BEING PREPARED ISN'T A BAD
THING. IN FACT IT CAN BE DOWNRIGHT
CRUCIAL! JUST TO PICK A RELEVANT AND
TIMELY EXAMPLE.....AND THERE ARE MANY
.....WHEN A NATION ----INDEED THE ENTIRE
WORLD COMMUNITY ----**

WAS NOT PREPARED FOR AN UNEXPECTED AND UNFORSEEN PANDEMIC ---THE RESULTS WERE AND HAVE BEEN AND ARE CATASTROPHIC!!!

NO, BEING WISELY PREPARED IS MORE THAN A GOOD THING, IT CAN BE LIFE-SAVING.

AND MAYBE THAT'S WHY OUR FIRST GLANCE AT THIS PARABLE MOST LIKELY LEADS US TO HEAR IT AS A CALL TO PREPAREDNESS. THE WISE BRIDESMAIDS BROUGHT ENOUGH OIL TO KEEP THEIR LAMPS BURNING AND THEN THEY BROUGHT EVEN MORE..... THE FOOLISH BRIDESMAIDS, WHO REALLY DID JUST WHAT WAS EXPECTED, HAD ENOUGH OIL WITH THEM BUT NOT MORE THAN ENOUGH.

IT WAS THE BRIDEGROOM WHO WAS LATE TO HIS OWN EVENT! THEY MAY HAVE BEEN PREPARED, BUT THEY CERTAINLY WEREN'T *PREPARED*.

THIS PARABLE IS EXACTLY THE STORY EVERY PARENT, SCOUT LEADER, AND SPARE TIRE SALESPERSON NEEDS IN ORDER TO GET HIS OR HER POINT ACROSS. YOU BETTER BE READY! YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN DISASTER WILL STRIKE! YOU'D BETTER BE PREPARED!

BUT HERE'S THE THING – – WHEN WE INTERPRET THIS PARABLE IN A WAY THAT IT ALL ABOUT BEING PREPARED, IT JUST DOESN'T LINE UP WITH OUR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S GRACE.

IF THIS PARABLE IS A WARNING THAT WE NEED TO SPEND ALL OUR TIME AMASSING ENOUGH, MORE THAN ENOUGH, GOODS ON EARTH OR TREASURES IN HEAVEN – – WHETHER THAT MEANS WE PRAY MORE OR WORK MORE OR SHINE OUR LAMPS BEFORE OTHERS MORE – – ALL IN ORDER TO EARN OUR WAY INTO HEAVEN, THEN WE ARE ESPOUSING WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS; WE ARE SAYING WE CAN EARN GOD’S LOVE, EVEN THAT WE MUST EARN GOD’S LOVE OR WE WON’T BE INCLUDED IN GOD’S KINGDOM.

AND THAT'S JUST NOT RIGHT.AFTER ALL-----
WE HEAR ABOUT GOD'S GRACE -----WE HEAR
THAT WHILE WE WERE STILL SINNERS CHRIST
DIED FOR US.

NOT WHEN WE WERE GOOD ENOUGH. NOT
WHEN WE HAD WORKED HARD ENOUGH. NOT
WHEN WE HAD PERFORMED ENOUGH CHARITY.
WHILE WE WERE STILL SINNERS, WHEN WE
WERE STILL MESSING UP, AT THE EXACT SAME
TIME WE WERE FORGETTING EVERYTHING WE
HAD BEEN TAUGHT TO BRING ALONG IN THE
BAG OF TRICKS FOR OUR LIVES, CHRIST WAS
RECONCILING US TO GOD. CHRIST WAS
USHERING US INTO THE PARTY.

**SO WHILE BEING PREPARED IS A GOOD THING,
BOTH BEFORE THE PANDEMIC OF A CENTURY
AND IN OUR SPIRITUAL LIVES BEFORE GOD,
BEING PREPARED DOESN'T EARN US THE FAVOR
OF THE BRIDEGROOM..... SO, *BEING
PREPARED MAY JUST NOT BE WHAT THIS
PARABLE IS ALL ABOUT.***

**WHAT IF, UPON WAKING UP AND REALIZING
THEIR OIL HAD BEEN COMPLETELY CONSUMED,
THE SO-CALLED FOOLISH BRIDESMAIDS HAD
JUST STAYED PUT? WHAT IF THEY HAD NOT RUN
OUT TO TRY TO COVER UP THEIR MISTAKE?**

**WHAT IF THEY HAD NOT SCRAMBLED AROUND
WITH AN EFFORT MADE TOO LATE TO MAKE UP
FOR NOT BEING PREPARED? -----WHAT IF THEY
HAD JUST RECOGNIZED THAT THEY WERE
FALLIBLE HUMAN BEINGS AND ACKNOWLEDGED
THEIR SHORTCOMINGS BEFORE THE
BRIDEGROOM WHEN HE CAME?**

**THE BRIDEGROOM IN THE STORY DOESN'T EVER
EVEN MENTION THE OIL OR PREPAREDNESS OR
LACK THEREOF. HE DOESN'T PRAISE THE WISE
BRIDESMAIDS FOR THINKING AHEAD. HE
DOESN'T EVEN THANK THEM FOR BEING READY
EVEN WHEN HE WASN'T THERE ON TIME.**

**WHEN THE FOOLISH BRIDESMAIDS ARRIVE AT
THE BANQUET WITH PLENTY OF OIL ----IF NOT IN
PLENTY OF TIME----- HE DOES NOT CHASTISE
THEM FOR NOT HAVING ENOUGH OIL THE FIRST
TIME; HE LEAVES THEM OUT BECAUSE THEY
WEREN'T AT THE HOUSE WHEN HE ARRIVED.
FOR THE BRIDEGROOM IT DOESN'T SEEM TO BE
ABOUT THE OIL AT ALL. HE SIMPLY TAKES THE
WISE YOUNG GIRLS ALONG WITH HIM TO THE
WEDDING BANQUET BECAUSE, READY OR NOT,
THEY ARE THE ONES WHO ARE THERE.**

**BOTH SETS OF BRIDESMAIDS FELL ASLEEP,
WHICH IS REALLY THE ONLY THING THAT SEEMS
TO BE A PROBLEM; IT'S REALLY THE ONLY
DIRECTION GIVEN TO THOSE HEARING THIS
PARABLE, "KEEP AWAKE!" – THE SAME
DIRECTION GIVEN TO THE DISCIPLES IN THE
GARDEN AT GETHSEMANE ON THE NIGHT OF
JESUS' ARREST WHEN HE GOES TO PRAY,
DEEPLY GRIEVED, "STAY AWAKE."**

**BOTH SETS OF BRIDESMAIDS FAILED AT THIS
ONE TASK, TO STAY AWAKE AND ATTENTIVE TO
THE ONE WHO WILL BE COMING TO THEM AT
ANY MINUTE IN ANY HOUR.**

IF ONLY THOSE WHO HAD RUN OUT OF OIL HAD JUST STAYED BEHIND WHEN THEY WOKE, THEY, TOO, WOULD AT LEAST HAVE BEEN THERE.

THEY COULD HAVE JOINED THE PROCESSION AND ENTERED THE FESTIVE BANQUET. IF ONLY THEY HAD BEEN THERE HE WOULD HAVE SEEN THEM; HE COULD HAVE INCLUDED THEM.

I RECOGNIZE THAT EVEN IF THIS PARABLE ISN'T ABOUT HAVING ENOUGH OIL IT STILL HAS A HARSH SOUND TO IT.....

**THE DOOR IS SHUT IN THE FACE OF THOSE WHO
DIDN'T SHOW UP AND EVEN THAT DOESN'T SIT
WELL WITH WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT JESUS,
WITH THE ABUNDANT GRACE THAT IS
PROMISED, THE CALL TO FORGIVE SEVENTY
TIMES SEVEN TIMES, THE PROMISE THAT EVEN
WHEN WE OWE A GAZILLION DOLLARS OUR
DEBT WILL BE FORGOTTEN..... *BUT THIS
PARABLE ISN'T THE END OF THE GOSPEL.
(THANK GOD!) THIS PARABLE IS ONE IN A
STRING OF PARABLES WITH INCREASING AND
INCREASING URGENCY.***

IT'S TOLD, LIKE THE OTHER PARABLES FROM MATTHEW'S GOSPEL THAT WE HAVE STUDIED IN RECENTS WEEKS..... WE SEE THAT TIME IS SHORT FOR JESUS TO MAKE HIS POINT, TO PREACH HIS GOOD NEWS. EVEN THE TELLING OF THESE PARABLES BECOMES LIKE A PARABLE BECAUSE ALL OF THESE HARSH POSSIBILITIES, THROWING PEOPLE OUT AND SHUTTING DOORS, LATER SEPARATING SHEEP AND GOATS FOR ETERNAL PUNISHMENT, ALL OF THESE DIFFICULT WORDS ARE CHOICES FOR JESUS WHO IS GOD, JESUS WHO IS LORD, JESUS WHO IS SOVEREIGN OVER ALL LIFE AND DEATH.

THESE ARE CHOICES JESUS COULD MAKE WHEN IT COMES TO ADDRESSING HUMAN BEINGS WHO RESIST TRANSFORMATION, WHO CAN'T BE BOTHERED TO SHOW UP, WHO DON'T SEE THE NEED OF OTHERS IN OUR MIDST. THE PILING OF DIFFICULT PARABLE ON TOP OF DIFFICULT PARABLE INCREASES THE ANXIETY IN THE NARRATIVE AS IT RUSHES TOWARD THE CRISIS OF THE CROSS THE EPITOME OF ALL HUMAN FAILURE, THE EXECUTION OF ONE WHO IS INNOCENT, THE EXECUTION OF GOD OUT OF FEAR.

UNTIL FINALLY COMES THE TRIUMPH OF THE RESURRECTION WHEN GOD SAYS, “I COULD TOSS YOU OUT. IT’S IS POSSIBLE FOR ME TO SHUT THE DOOR. IT WOULD BE ‘FAIR’ FOR ME TO LET YOU SUFFER FOR THE SUFFERING YOU INFLICTED ON OTHERS, THE SUFFERING YOU INFLICT ON ME. BUT I WON’T.” THE PARABLES DON’T END WHEN THE VERSE COMES TO AN END; THE PARABLES END WHEN WE GET TO EASTER.

READY OR NOT, JESUS INVITES US. READY OR NOT, JESUS COMES TO US. READY OR NOT, JESUS WANTS TO BRING US TO THE BANQUET.

PREPARATION, YEAH, IT'S A GOOD THING. WHEN WE ARE PREPARED, WE MAY BE MORE APT TO SEE HIM COMING IN THE POOR, THE HUNGRY, THE THIRSTY, THE IMPRISONED. PREPARATION ALLOWS US TO BE A PART OF GOD'S KINGDOM BUILDERS, USING THE TALENTS WE HAVE TO NURTURE GOD'S GRACE IN THE LIVES OF OTHER PEOPLE AND THE CHURCH. PREPARATION GIVES US TIME TO FIND OUR SPIRITS STRENGTHENED OUR WISDOM SHARPENED OUR FAITH DEEPENED, BUT THE REALITY IS EVEN THE BEST PREPARATION ISN'T WHAT SAVES US. EVEN THE MOST PREPARED AMONG US WILL FALL ASLEEP SOMETIMES.

**IT'S EASY TO GET CAUGHT UP IN THE RAT RACE
OF PREPARATION -- WHETHER IT LOOKS LIKE
BUYING PAPER TOWELS BY THE CASE AT
COSTCO "JUST IN CASE" OR GRABBING THREE
GALLONS OF MILK AT THE GROCERY STORE
BEFORE AN IMPENDING BLIZZARD-----EVEN IN
BETTER TIMES ----ON BETTER DAYS ---- WE
HEAR THE WORRY ABOUT BEING PREPARED IN
THE CHURCH WHEN WE MAKE EXCUSES WHEN
THERE ARE OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH WHICH
WE COULD EXPLORE OUR FAITH FURTHER OR
DEEPER, REACH OUT IN COMPASSION TO
NEIGHBORS IN NEED -- OH, I DON'T KNOW
ENOUGH TO JOIN AN ADULT EDUCATION CLASS.**

I'M NOT PREPARED TO BE A PART OF A BIBLE STUDY. I DON'T THINK I REALLY HAVE THE EXPERTISE TO INTERACT WITH PEOPLE AT OUR FOOD PANTRY OR HELP TO ASSIST THEM THROUGH OUR VARIOUS OUTREACH MINISTRIES AND FUNDS.....

I JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M SUPPOSED TO SAY. I'M JUST NOT READY.

AND THE REALITY IS THAT WE MIGHT NOT BE READY. SOME OF US ARE, SOME OF US AREN'T, BUT THE BEING READY ISN'T THE POINT.

SHOWING UP IS – – READY OR NOT, SHOWING
UP, TRYING TO KEEP AWAKE, LOOKING FOR THE
BRIDEGROOM AS HE COMES TO US IN WHAT
SEEMS LIKE A DARK NIGHT VOID OF THE
PRESENCE OF GOD, THIS IS POINT. SHOWING
UP, WITH AUTHENTICITY AND HONEST, WITH
HUMILITY AND AWARENESS, THIS IS THE
POSTURE THAT IS DESIRED BY GOD.

BECAUSE READY OR NOT HE WILL COME TO
TAKE US WITH HIM.

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