Book 8 Sunday November 4, 1979

"PREPARED WAITING" Matthew 25:1-13

One condition of life which all of us have in common whether we be Christian or not, young or old, rich or poor, male or female, is that there is a lot of waiting to be done in this world. Life seems to be made up of a lot of waiting for one thing or another. Some of the waiting is in joyful anticipation and other waiting is filled with fear and trembling, and still other waiting can be boring and dull. It all depends on what we are waiting for.

One of the reasons that Christmas has such a magical attraction for most people is because of the waiting we do for it, the preparation and the anticipation. We are anxious for it to come and yet we also enjoy the time of preparation and waiting.

Pascal once said that we really never seek for things, what we enjoy is the search for things. Every search involves a kind of waiting. We may be active while we are waiting, but waiting there is.

Now there are several kinds of waiting. In one kind, like waiting for Thanksgiving or Christmas or some other holiday, we know when it's going to happen. This is predictable waiting. We know the exact date of what we're waiting for. With this kind of waiting we know how much time we have for preparation.

But there is another kind of waiting and with this kind we do not know exactly when the event is going to take place. We do not know when we are going to die. We do not know when we are going to be sick or have an accident. We do not know when some grand opportunity will come our way. We do not know when many of the happy surprises in our life will occur--someone we love very much comes to visit, or an unexpected gift arrives; a promotion comes sooner than we expected or later than we expected.

It is with this kind of waiting that the parable we are considering this morning is concerned. "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." In other words, in your waiting, be prepared so that whatever happens you are ready.

I had a professor in college whose custom it was to pick out any one of us to give a summary of the preceding class session. Nobody knew whose turn was next--all we knew was that someone among us would be called upon. You can be sure that most of us paid strict attention. Other teachers had a different method. Before the class began they assigned a student to prepare a report. Then we knew everything was taken care of. Nothing unexpected could happen. It all proceeded according to schedule and a person could go on carving his or her initials on the desk

In this parable Jesus Christ is saying the Kingdom of God is like the first professor---there are surprises. We may be called on almost anytime and we are to be prepared. The parable is also saying that life does not always run on a pre-determined schedule. There are some things we are to prepare for without knowing when or if they will happen. Much of the insurance industry is built on this principle. We buy insurance so that we are prepared for the unexpected.

So the parable is about "prepared waiting," the responsibility to be ready as much as possible for whatever might happen.

With these things in mind, let's now look more closely at the parable of the five wise bridesmaids and the five foolish bridesmaids.

A wedding party was one of the grand festivities in a Palestinian village. Workers were given the day off. Children were let out of the synagogue school. Women hurried through their household work and all went to the wedding and remained for the celebration.

The high point of the wedding celebration came when the bridegroom took the bride from her father's house to their new home. This is where Jesus picks up the story for his parable. The neighborhood maidens were waiting for the bridegroom to bring his bride home so that they could join in the celebration there. But there was a long wait and drowsiness came upon them.

Finally at midnight they were awakened with the announcement that the bridegroom was arriving. Five of the maidens, seeing that their lamps were almost out of oil, asked the other five to give them some of their oil. They refused.

So the foolish maidens were forced to seek oil elsewhere, and while they were searching, the celebration took place and they missed it completely. They weren't prepared so they lost out.

When Jesus originally told this story he was probably referring to himself as the bridegroom and alluding to the fact that many were unprepared for his coming and by the time they would be ready for him it would be too late.

Through the years, however, the parable has taken on a broader meaning and it's that we are considering this morning.

To understand that broader meaning, look first at the preparation and the waiting of the five wise maidens. Note first that both the wise and the foolish maidens went to sleep while waiting. Sleep comes to all of us whether we be wise or foolish when we are tired of waiting. The wise could sleep because they knew they were prepared and the foolish could sleep because they thought the bridegroom would come early and they would have plenty of oil, and if he did not come when expected, perhaps some miracle would help them. They had always gotten by before by borrowing something they needed in an emergency and they would get by again.

But the parable speaks of more than just waiting or going to sleep while we're waiting. It is a parable about being prepared for the best as well as for the worst. This is something of a new approach for many of us. Usually when we think of being prepared, we think of it primarily as being prepared for the worst. Much of the insurance we buy is for protection against disaster and that's needed. But in the parable, the wise maidens prepared for a wedding feast, for a joyous occasion. They prepared for a celebration.

Prepare for the best as well as the worst. It's a new way of looking a preparation. We spend billions preparing for war, so that we are ready for a surprise attack from the enemy, but it's difficult to get a nation to prepare for peace.

In our private lives, we often try to prepare for the rainy day, but we do not give as much thought to preparing for the sunny days. We recall the depression of the 1930's

and we want to be protected from its repetition. But the days of prosperity find us unready to be thankful for our gifts; we do not know how to give joyfully, and we are not aware of the dangers of our own prosperity.

Joy at midnight! We're often not prepared for it. Many people wait anxiously for retirement, but at the same time make little preparation for it and are soon bored or they die shortly thereafter. People buy insurance against fire and theft, but make little preparation for marriage so that they can enjoy the good in it.

Christianity has often made the same mistake by helping people prepare for death, but at the same time giving little preparation for living a meaningful and fruitful life here and now. We forget that Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

The parable is saying that the midnights in life are not just the sign of doom, but they can also be the hour when great joy comes into our lives. But when the cry sounds, then there is no time for preparation. Either we are ready or we are not.

Thus the tragedy of many lives is in missing the best because of not being ready for it. We are often only aware of the best after it has passed us by and the door is shut. We are not prepared to see the voices of hope and joy, nor do we see the visions of beauty all around us. The wisdom of the wise maidens in the parable tells us that good events require preparation for their enjoyment as much as bad events require preparation for their endurance.

2. Secondly, the parable reminds us that when the best or the worst comes unexpectedly at midnight, there are some things that cannot be borrowed. We live in an economy where we are most of the time led to believe that we can borrow or lease or rent almost anything we need at any time. And there are many things that can be borrowed, leased or rented, but there are also many things that cannot.

The foolish maidens were foolish because they assumed they could borrow from someone else if they were caught short in their own preparation. That there will always be somebody around to fill our lack is one of the generally accepted ideas which is very popular. Let others make the provisions and in a pinch we will find some kind person to lend us what we need.

But there are some things that cannot be borrowed on a moment's notice. Can a person trained with long experience in decision making and responsibility instantly lend this to someone else? Can a person trained in Christian courage give it on demand to a neighbor who all of his or her life has lived in cowardly comfort?

Can a saint who has gathered insight from long years of prayer and cultivating the spiritual life instantly give that insight and experience on request to someone else who has always been careless of God? Can a person who has never really grown up or assumed responsibility all of a sudden one day say, "I need to be an adult now and I want to get married." Maturity won't come quite that fast and it cannot be borrowed immediately from someone else. Can a person who has never learned to love or known love all of a sudden one day borrow love from someone else and become a loving person that very instant?

There are some things that cannot be borrowed. In spite of the fact that we have instant coffee, instant tea and many other kinds of instant products, we cannot borrow instant love or instant experience or instant courage or instant maturity.

We cannot borrow character. It must be developed. There come times in all of our lives when great depth of character is needed. We cannot borrow morality. There are times when it is too late to all of a sudden develop moral standards, too late to develop good habits, too late to borrow oil for our lamps so that we might see the right way.

We cannot borrow friends. If all of our live we think we can go it alone and slough off other people and treat them in a cavalier fashion, there may come the time when we need a friend very much and we will find that we cannot borrow one or rent one.

More than anything we cannot borrow at ~~that~~ the last minute a deep religious faith. Again and again we hear the cry, "Give us of your oil, for our lamps have gone out." And though we would, we cannot. There are some things that cannot be borrowed. One cannot in a moment hand over faith, courage, character, peace, inner resources. These must be obtained at the source, from God.

So this is a parable of waiting and of readiness. The fact of lie is that there is no shortcut to obtaining things we canot borrow.

Having no oil when oil is desperately needed is the ultimate tragedy of irreligion. I am not saying that irreligious people are always unhappy. There is much in the world that responds to much that is in them. Their happy times can be answered by the happiness in others. Their truth-loving by the search for truth in many fields, their affectionate moods by human love. Yet when all of this is granted, for the thorough-going irreligionist a tragedy lies in wait. Some day his or her life will go out into the depths--profound trouble, profound love, deep moral need, ethical devotion, profound spiritual depth and then oil will be needed, and what if there is no oil there and it cannot be borrowed? Amen.