Sunday February 7, 1982

Book 10

"BE PREPARED!" Matthew 25:1-13

Today we recognize and honor the Scouting programs in First-Plymouth Church. Most of us are familiar with the Scout motto—"Be Prepared." What we may not be aware of is that this same theme is a familiar one in the teachings of Jesus. The parable we read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew is about this subject--"Be Prepared."

The story is about ten young women, five who were wise because they were prepared and five who were foolish because they were not prepared. All ten were waiting to attend a wedding celebration.

In Jesus' time, a wedding was one of the memorable festivities in a Jewish community. People were given the day off from work. Children were let out of synagogue school. Women hurried through their household work and all went to the wedding and remained for the party afterwards. This was not only a privilege, but a duty.

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

Finally at midnight, they were awakened by the announcement that the bridegroom was arriving. Five of the women seeing that their lamps were almost out of oil, asked the other five to share their oil with them. The five who had enough oil refused, so the first five were forced to seek more oil elsewhere and while they were searching for more oil, the celebration took place and they missed it completely. They were not prepared!

Most Biblical scholars agree that when Jesus told this story, he was no doubt referring to himself as the bridegroom and also referring to the fact that many were unprepared for his coming and by they time they would be ready, it would be too late. The event would have passed them by. Later on as the early church remembered the

story and told it over and over again, they understood it primarily as dealing with the second coming of Christ and of being ready for it.

However, through the years, this parable as have all other parables, has also taken on a broader meaning. It is a story which deals with being prepared while we wait.

1. First of all, we are all aware that as human beings young or old, wise or foolish, Christian or not Christian, there is a lot of waiting to be done in this world. In fact, sometimes life seems to be made up of waiting for one thing and then another.

There are in general two ways of waiting--(1) waiting in joyful anticipation as we look forward to an event, or (2) waiting in fear and trembling, afraid of what's going to happen or what might happen.

There are also too kinds of waiting--(1)the kind of waiting for an event which we know is going to happen at a designated time, such as waiting for a particular holiday or for our birthday. (2) the kind of waiting for something which we do not know when it will happen. For example, we do not know when we are going to die or when someone else is going to die. We do not know when an accident will occur. We do not know when we might be surprised by a relative or friend coming to visit, or receive a gift from someone when we hadn't expected it. Or perhaps a promotion comes sooner than we expected, or later. All of us do a lot of this kind of waiting--waiting and yet not knowing when it will happen.

It is with this kind of waiting that the parable deals. Remember Jesus ended the story with the phrase--"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." And with this statement he is suggesting very strongly--"be prepared."

Life does not always run on a predictable pre-determined schedule. There are many 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 to be sure ~~that~~ we are prepared for the unexpected and the unpredictable. It's one way of being prepared.

2. Secondly, even though there is a lot of waiting to be done in this world, note that if we are prepared, the waiting takes on a different character. We can wait with a certain peace of mind. The five women in the parable who had enough oil for their lamps and the five who did not have enough, both groups fell asleep during the waiting period.

Sleep comes to all of us whether we are wise or foolish. The wise could sleep because they knew they were prepared and the foolish could sleep because they thought they knew when the bridegroom was coming and since they thought he was coming early, they were sure they had enough oil for their lamps, and if he did not come when expected, some miracle would save them. They had gotten by before by borrowing in an emergency and they would get by again.

We all know people like this. Anyone can give examples of persons who do not make the kind of preparations that are needed and then go around trying to scrounge from friends to get out of the jam that they have landed themselves in. STudents do it at school, people do it in the various social relationships they have--there is always someone in a crowd known to be unreliable when it comes to doing his or her part. Those of us who are frequently beset by such people cannot help cheering the outcome of this parable.

We all find ourselves hoping the boom gets lowered somewhere along the line on people like that even if we do help such persons out of whatever jams they are in. Such people seem to be oblivious to the fact that their behavior has damaging effect on others.

So the parable speaks of being prepared while waiting--but being prepared for what? Often when we think of the phrase, "be prepared," we think of it as being prepared for the worst that could happen. And that's important. But this parable is emphasizing being prepared for the best.

Much of the insurance we buy for example, is for protection again disaster. And that's necessary. But we need also to prepare for the best. The wise young women in the story were prepared for the wedding feast and for the joy of a wonderful occasion.

Prepare for the best as well as the worst. It's a new way of looking at being prepared. Even on a national scale we need to broaden our concept of being prepared. We spend billions and billions on defense, preparing ourselves for the worst that could happen-- so that we are ready for a surprise attack from the enemy, but as a nation we find it difficult to prepare for the best--to prepare positiveily for peace.

In our private lives we often try to prepare for the rainy day but we do not give much thought to being prepared for the sunny days. We recall the depression of the 1930's and we want to be prepared so that we are protected from its repetition. But the days of prosperity find us unready to be thankful for what we have.

This parable is about being prepared for joy at unexpected times--joy at midnight. Many people wait anxiously for retirement and for the joy that will go with it, but at the same time make little preparation for 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 midnights of life are not just signs of doom, but they can also be the hour when great joy comes into our lives. But if we are not prepared for it, we will miss it and then it's too late for preparation.

The tragedy of many lives is in missing the best because of not being prepared for it. We are often aware of the best only after it has passed us by and the door is shut. We are not prepared to hear the voices of joy and hope. The wisdom of the wise women in this story tells that good events require preparation for their enjoyment.

3. And thirdly, this story of being prepared reminds us once more that when the best or the worst comes, and we are not prepared, 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 anytime. And there are many things that can be borrowed, but there are also many others that cannot be borrowed.

Can a person trained in 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 the spiritual aspects of life?

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, this instant, and I am going to be 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, fast foods and more, we cannot borrow instant love or instant maturity from someone else. We cannot borrow character. It must be developed. We cannot borrow morality. There are times when it is to late all of a sudden to 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.

More than anything else, we cannot borrow at 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.

So this is a parable of waiting and of readiness. It's a story of being prepared. Prepare for the best as well as the worst. Amen.