Sunday, November 7, 1999
PREPARING FOR THE BEST
Matthew 25:1-13

Be prepared! Most of us know this as the motto for the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, but it's good advice for all of us. Yet, isn't it true that when we normally think of "being prepared," we have in mind being prepared primarily for the worst — for tragedy or disaster? Much of the insurance industry is built on this principle. We buy insurance so that we are prepared for catastrophes, and that's good. If we have an auto accident, a fire in our home, a medical emergency, a flood, a tornado, an earthquake, or a burglary, we want to be adequately covered.

But what about being prepared for the best? Many people miss a lot of joy in life because they are not prepared to receive it. And when it comes, it's too late to borrow what is needed. Our Christian faith has often made the mistake of emphasizing how people should prepare for death and the life to come, important as that is, while not having much to say about being prepared for living a joyful life here and now. We forget that Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." Being prepared for the best is the main point of the parable Jesus told about a wedding celebration and the ten bridesmaids — five were prepared, and five were not.

In today's sermon, we're going to first examine how this story applies to us in our personal lives, and then how it applies to our church congregation in the present, and how it can help our congregation prepare for the best in the future as well.

Here's the background of the story. Ten young women had the honor of being chosen to be participants in a wedding celebration. They were assigned the important task of carrying lamps in the wedding procession. For some reason, the bride and groom were delayed and did not arrive until much later than expected, so the celebration did not start on time. Instead of beginning at 6:00 in the evening, the bride and groom did not arrive for the reception until midnight.

Five of the young women had prepared for the possible delay by bringing extra oil for their lamps. Maybe they knew from experience that many wedding events do not start on time. The other five did not know that, or if they did, they were not prepared for it. Now they tried to borrow some oil from those who had brought enough. The answer they received was, "No! There will not be enough for you and for us. You had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." By the time they returned from the store, it was too late. The party was underway, and they were not allowed to enter.

As you can see, this is not a story about the opportunity to "share," that favorite word so often used today.

Most Biblical scholars agree that when Jesus told this story, he was referring to himself as the bridegroom and noting that many people were unprepared for his coming, and by the time they were prepared, 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, it was understood primarily as dealing with the second coming of Christ, with some people being prepared and others not prepared.

However, through the years, this parable, like many others, has taken on some broader themes for those of us trying to live a Christian life. As many parables do, this one begins with the words, “The kingdom of heaven will be like this.” It’s helpful for me to paraphrase this sentence by saying, “This is the way God’s world operates,” or “God has so made creation that it works like this.”

First, there’s the issue of “waiting.” We all know that as human beings, young or old, wise or foolish, there is a lot of waiting to be done in this world. Events do not always take place as planned.

There are, in general, two kinds of moods in our waiting. One mood is that of joyful anticipation as you look forward to an event — a birthday celebration, a wedding, an anniversary, a special holiday like Christmas, or a vacation trip to some exotic place. A date has been set, and you look forward to it with joyful anticipation. That’s the kind of waiting that was going on in this story.

Another mood in waiting is with fear and trembling because the outcome is uncertain. Will the lab tests show that the tumor is malignant or benign? There’s been an accident, and you wait to learn if your loved one is alive or has been critically injured. You’ve done something wrong and wait in fear, wondering whether you will be caught and, if so, what punishment will come.

We also do a lot of waiting for things we know will happen but are unsure exactly when. It is this kind of waiting that is present in this parable.

The ten young women in the story knew the bride and groom were going to arrive sometime that evening, but they didn’t know the exact hour. That’s one of the points Jesus was making. He said, “Watch, therefore; be prepared, for you do not know when it will take place.”

Some things in life do not run on a predictable schedule. There are many things we need to prepare for without knowing exactly when they will happen, both good things and bad things. I had a professor in college who was well known for giving “pop quizzes.” She wanted us to be prepared for each class session.

If you are prepared, then much of the waiting you do in life can take on a different character. You can wait with peace of mind. The five bridesmaids in the story who had enough oil for their lamps could sleep in peace while they waited. No matter how late the wedding party arrived, they would be ready. The other five either thought they knew for sure when the celebration would begin or assumed that if it was later than expected, they could always borrow what they needed.

There are people like that — individuals who are seldom prepared for anything, good or bad, and then go around trying to scrounge from others at the last minute to get out of the jam they’re in. Students do it at school. People do it in social relationships, on their jobs, in their spiritual lives, and in countless other places. But there will come times when it’s too late to borrow.

As I said at the beginning of the sermon, this story speaks specifically about being prepared for the best. Many people miss a lot of joy and fun in life because they are not prepared to receive it. If you are a student, this means that going to school, doing your best, and continuing to learn is a way of preparing for the best. If you are a parent, it means taking time to enjoy your

children as they are growing up. This is also building a solid relationship for the future when they are adults. It's a way of having oil for your lamps in the future when you will need it. Preparation for joy is as necessary as preparation for bad times.

The story reminds us that there is always some waiting to be done in life, and the best kind of waiting is "prepared waiting."

Another theme in this story is that there are some things in life that cannot be borrowed. This is an important reminder because we live in a culture where we are led to believe that we can borrow, lease, or rent almost anything we need at any time, so good preparation is not given a high priority. The idea that there will always be somebody around to fill our lack is a generally accepted notion in our time. Let others make provisions for the future, and we will find some kind soul to lend us what we need.

You may have lived next to borrowing neighbors and learned how tiresome their habit becomes. They are always running over at inconvenient times to borrow food or a chair. I had a neighbor once who never owned a lawnmower in his life and never returned one.

I have come to the conclusion that there is no good achievement that does not cost us something. 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 has lived all of his or her life in cowardly comfort?

Can a saintly person who has gathered insight from long years of prayer and the cultivation of the spiritual life instantly lend that spiritual maturity to someone who has always been careless in their spiritual growth but suddenly needs it? Oil for such lamps cannot be quickly borrowed.

Can you borrow a good reputation, good character, integrity, or virtue from someone else when you need it? As I was talking with some friends this past week about what can be borrowed and what cannot, one of them said, "The problem with me is not only remembering that there are things that cannot be borrowed, but I borrow the wrong things. I borrow trouble from others. I borrow worry. I borrow stress. I have enough of those problems on my own, why do I borrow more from others?"

As far as our personal lives are concerned, this story tells us: it is important to be prepared for the best as well as the worst; waiting is a part of life — things do not always run on our schedule, and while we wait, it's helpful if we're prepared; and there are some very essential things in life that cannot be borrowed.

Now, how does this story apply to our congregation in the present and in the future as far as being prepared for the best as well as the worst? As I look back over my 28 years of ministry among you, it's an understatement to say that our progress together in ministry has been and continues to be outstanding. Overall, we have had enough oil for our lamps.

This is an incredible church. The staff members I am privileged to work with every day are highly skilled, talented, and dedicated. I hope all of you appreciate each one of them as much as I do.

From time to time, some of my ministerial colleagues from other churches will say to me, "First-Plymouth Church is such a remarkable congregation with so many exciting programs and

ministries, does the congregation have any weaknesses or do you personally have any disappointments?"

My answer is, "Yes, I have two disappointments. The first is that our attendance and participation in the three worship services could be much better. A church with our number of members should have over 1,000 in worship every weekend, including the summer months. We have this wonderful church building for worship. It's like a beautiful lamp. The oil for the lamp is people. When it's not filled, it's like a lamp without oil. And it's not that our worship services aren't appreciated. Last spring we did an extensive evaluation of the worship services. The ratings we received about every part of our worship service were extremely positive. I know that many of our members have very busy lives. I also know that your regular participation in worship is what provides the oil for the lamps in your spiritual lives. The many letters we receive each week from our radio and television listeners tell us how much oil we are providing for the lamps in the lives of many people we do not see in person. I am grateful that we can do this.

My second disappointment is that our congregation still has too many members on church welfare. By church welfare, I mean that we have many members who benefit from the programs and ministries of the church but make very small contributions or no contributions at all for the financial support of the church. They have not yet discovered the joy of giving. That's why it concerns me so much and why it's a disappointment. It's truly a spiritual issue. This congregation is a strong one and will continue to carry out its ministries regardless of how many members are on church welfare. But it's a spiritual issue because if you are not a giving person, it means you are stunting your spiritual growth. To be a giving person is a way of putting oil in the lamp of your spiritual life. That's not a contradiction. Jesus taught that the more you give, the more you will receive.

I have two goals in my continuing ministry among you — to have more than 1,000 in worship every week and to continually be reducing the number of members who are on church welfare. I hope you noticed that I have been saying, "in my continuing ministry among you." I want to emphasize this because every now and then, I'll meet someone in the community who is not a member of the congregation and they will say to me, "I hear you are retiring soon." I tell them that's not my plan or intention, unless they know something I don't know.

Sometime during this coming week, you will receive in the mail a letter from me asking you to fill out a pledge card to let the church know what you intend to give financially for the work of the church for the year 2000, beginning January 1. Please read this letter carefully and return the completed pledge card to the church office as soon as possible. Your generous participation in financially supporting the work of this congregation will not only provide oil for our lamp of ministry, but it will also provide oil for your spiritual life. It's a way of helping the church and you personally to prepare for the best. Amen.