Book 38

Sunday November 7, 1999

PREPARING FOR THE BEST

Matthew 25:1-13

Be prepared! Most of us know this is the motto for 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, or a fire in our home, or a medical emergency, or a flood, or tornado, or earthquake, or 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, but at the same time has not had 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 this parable which 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 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 under way and they were not allowed to enter.

As you can see this is not a story about the opportunity to "share," that favorite word that is used so much 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've 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 and of some people being prepared and other not prepared.

However through the years this parable like many others has taken on some broader themes for those of us who are trying to live a Christian life. As many of the 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 the creation that it works like this."

First there's the issue of "waiting." We are all aware 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 can 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 laboratory 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 you wait in fear wondering whether or not you will be caught and if so what punishment will be coming.

All of us also do a lot of waiting for something we know is going to happen but we are not sure exactly when it will begin. 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 did not know the exact hour. That's one of the points Jesus was making. He said, "Watch therefore, be prepared, for you 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 it 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 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 a certain 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 maybe they 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 are 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 in 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, then you are 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 that 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. That there will always be somebody around to fill our lack is one the generally accepted ideas very popular with us. 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 wearisome their

habit becomes. They are always running over at inconvenient times to borrow food or a chair. I had a neighbor one time in another city who never owned a lawn mower 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 on request to another person who has always been careless in spiritual growth but all of a sudden is in need of it? Oil for such kinds of 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 of my 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 another person. 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 that 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 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. 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 he or she 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 even more so provide oil for your spiritual life. It's a way of helping the church and you personally to prepare for the best. Amen.