Sunday, November 6, 2005
ARE YOU PREPARED?
Matthew 25:1-13

The recent hurricanes were a reminder to everyone of the importance of being prepared. Some people did not have flood insurance. Others did not have an adequate supply of food and water. Many people did not have extra batteries for their flashlights when they were without electricity for several days. On the positive side, there were people who had made adequate preparations for any emergency.

Are you prepared? Much of the insurance industry is based on the principle of being prepared for the catastrophes that can come into your life without warning — an auto accident, an illness, a tornado, a flood, a flat tire. It makes good sense to be prepared for the unfortunate events that come into your life.

But are you also prepared for the good things that come your way? Many people miss a lot of joy in life because they are not ready to receive it.

In the story read from Matthew's gospel today, five women were prepared to participate in a joyous wedding celebration, while five were not. Too many religious people make the mistake of emphasizing how to prepare for death and the life to come — important as that is — but at the same time do not place enough emphasis on being prepared to live a joyful life here and now. They forget that Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

Being prepared to receive the good things that life can offer is the main point of this story Jesus told about ten bridesmaids and a wedding celebration. Five were prepared, and five were not.

How does this matter of being prepared for the best in life apply to you personally, so that you do not miss the joy of life? And how does it apply to this congregation in the present and in the future?

Here's the background of this story from Matthew's gospel: Ten young women had the honor of being chosen to participate in a wedding celebration. They were assigned the important task of carrying lamps to light the way. But the bride and groom were delayed and did not arrive until much later than expected, so the party could not start on time. Instead of arriving at 6:00 in the evening, the bride and groom did not arrive until midnight. In all the weddings I've officiated, the bride and groom have never been that late. Sometimes they've been late for the rehearsal, but not for the wedding ceremony or the reception.

Five of the young women apparently knew that wedding celebrations in those days did not always begin on time, so they prepared by bringing extra oil for their processional lamps. The other five did not prepare for a possible delay. Their lamps used up all the oil during the waiting time. They tried to borrow from those who were prepared, but the answer they received was, "No! If we give you some of ours, we will not have enough. You need to go to the dealers and buy more for yourselves." By the time they returned from the store, it was too late. They missed the party altogether.

Most Biblical commentators agree that when Jesus told this story, he was referring to himself as the bridegroom and wanted to make the point that many people were unprepared for the abundant life he offered, and as a result, missed the happiness and joy which God wants you to experience.

Later on, as his followers remembered the story, it took on broader themes, as is true of most of Jesus' parables. This one begins with the words, "The Kingdom of heaven will be like this." A paraphrase of this sentence is: "This is the way God is at work in the world," or "This is what you can expect in life as God has designed it."

The first theme of the story is that of waiting. The story says, "The bridegroom was delayed." The guests and the bridesmaids had to wait. From your own life's experiences, you are aware that there is a lot of waiting that takes place in life.

Some of your waiting is filled with joyful anticipation. You look forward to an event — a birthday celebration, a wedding, an anniversary, a special holiday like Thanksgiving or Christmas, or a vacation trip to some exotic place. A date has been set, and you are filled with anticipation.

Other things you look forward to do not take place on schedule. You are at the airport waiting to greet someone you haven't seen for a long time. It's going to be a happy reunion. The flight is delayed. It's going to be three hours late, and those three hours seem like six hours. That's the kind of waiting that takes place in this story.

There is also the kind of waiting in life which is not filled with happy anticipation but with fear and trembling because the outcome is uncertain. Will the results of the lab tests you are waiting for reveal that the tumor is malignant or benign? There's been an accident, and you wait to learn if the person you love is hurt or not. You or someone you know is on trial, and you are waiting for the verdict of the jury — innocent or guilty? You've done something wrong, and you wait in fear, wondering whether you'll be caught and, if so, what the punishment will be.

You also do a lot of waiting for events you are sure are going to take place, but you don't know exactly when they will begin. It is this kind of waiting that is present in this parable.

The ten bridesmaids knew the bridegroom was going to arrive that evening but didn't know the exact time. There was only an estimated time of arrival. That's one of the points the story makes. The bridegroom's arrival was delayed. Jesus was saying, "You do not know when it will take place."

There are events in life that do not run on a predictable schedule. There are things you need to prepare for without knowing when they will occur — both good things and bad things. I had a professor in college who was well known for giving "pop" quizzes. She wanted her students to be prepared each class session.

If you are prepared, then the waiting you do in life can take on a different character. You have prepared for a potential pop quiz before each class session. Then you can wait with a certain peace of mind. The five bridesmaids in the story who had an ample supply of oil for their lamps could sleep in peace, knowing that even if the bridegroom was delayed, they would be ready. The other five thought they knew for sure when he would arrive, or maybe they assumed that if it was later than expected, they could always beg or borrow what was needed.

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

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, this story speaks especially about being prepared for the best. Many people miss a lot of joy and fun in life because they have not prepared to receive it. They are convinced that nothing good will ever come their way.

One way you can prepare for the best if you are a student is to go to school, do your class work and your homework, and continue to learn all you can. Then, when a good job comes along, you are prepared for it and will be able to obtain it.

If you are a parent, it means taking time to enjoy your children as they are growing up. Then you are building a solid foundation for the future when they are adults. It's a way of having enough oil for your lamp in the future when you will need it. Preparing for good times is as necessary as preparing for bad times.

Remember, the first theme in this story is that life is filled with waiting, and the best kind of waiting is "prepared waiting."

Another theme in the story is that there are some things in life that cannot be borrowed. This is especially important to remember because you live in a culture where you are led to believe you can borrow, buy, lease, or rent almost anything at any time. Thus, being prepared is not given a high priority. Let others make provisions for the future, and you will find some kind soul to lend you what you need when you need it.

But there are some things that simply cannot be borrowed. Can a person trained with long experience in decision-making and responsibility lend this to someone else who wants to borrow it? 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 spiritually mature individual who has gained insight from years of prayer and the cultivation of the spiritual life instantly lend that spiritual maturity to another person who has been careless in spiritual growth and now, all of a sudden, is in need of it? Oil for such kinds of lamps cannot be quickly borrowed.

Can you borrow in an emergency a good reputation, good character, or integrity from someone else when you need it? Can you borrow, on a moment's notice, spiritual maturity to help you face life's difficulties? As I was talking with some friends this week about what can be borrowed and what cannot, one person said, "My problem 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 stress. I have enough of those problems on my own — why do I borrow more from others?"

So as far as your personal life is concerned, this story tells you — it is important to be prepared for the best as well as the worst; waiting is a part of life because things do not always run on your schedule, and there are some very essential things in life that cannot be borrowed.

How does this story apply to this congregation in the present and in the future, as far as being prepared for the best and for emergencies? As I look back over my almost 34 years of ministry

among you, it's an understatement to say that the ministry of this congregation has been remarkable. We've been prepared. We've had enough oil for our lamps, and when it has been needed, we've had a surplus to see us through.

You are an incredible congregation. The staff members and volunteers that I am privileged to work with every day are highly skilled, dedicated, fun to be with, and filled with God's Spirit. As I said to you last weekend, I am filled with hope for the future of this congregation.

To change the metaphor, this congregation is like a lamp. You, the members, are the oil for that lamp. This beautiful church building, given to us by those who came before us, is another lamp for you and for the community. Again, you, the members, are the oil for this lamp.

This week, you should've received a letter from me and a pledge card with a return envelope. The money you pledge and give for the support of this congregation's many ministries is also oil for the lamp. We don't want to be like the five bridesmaids who were unprepared.

Your generous participation in financially supporting the work of this congregation will not only provide oil for the lamp of this congregation's continuing ministry, but it will also provide oil for your personal spiritual life. Giving people are happy people. Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Amen.