

## Matthew 25:1-13 “Our Last 24 Hours Together”

I think one of the mistakes we make in the church is how we portray Jesus as this perpetually nice guy who just sort of meandered around Galilee spreading good cheer and telling people to “be good to each other.” No doubt he *did* spend a lot of time and energy spreading good news. A lot of his parables were about how the reign of God would be unlike any other earthly kingdom and that justice and kindness and goodness and mercy would be the law of the land. A lot of these themes are found in what Bible scholars call the “party parables.” These are parables where Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a banquet or a feast or a wedding party. The Prodigal Son, the King’s Wedding Banquet, the Workers in the Vineyard ... all of these parables describe God’s generous invitation: The Kingdom of God is open. Everyone is invited and included. Even the people that a lot of folks think ought to be tossed out are embraced in God’s love and included in God’s great celebration feast. Prostitutes, lepers, sinners and tax-collectors ... it doesn’t matter: All are welcomed, all are embraced, all receive mercy and all are included in the great celebration of God’s Kingdom made manifest through Christ. And all ... means ... all. These are the kinds of parables that make us feel warm and secure in God’s love. And let me tell you, it’s great when these passages come up in the lectionary. Preachers *love* to preach on these passages. Excuse me, *some* preachers love to preach on these passages.

But every now and then you get a party parable like the one Peggy just read. This one is generally referred to as “The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids.” And it’s a weird one. It’s like an out-of-tune piano. Something about it just doesn’t sound right. It seems wildly out of step with the message of the other party parables. Instead of saying that those who we think are out are actually in ... this one says that those we think are in may very well be out. Including me. The message seems pretty straightforward: God’s reign is coming and so you’d better be ready. These are the sort of parables that get people thinking. “*Am I ready? If the reign of God came tomorrow, would I be one of the wise*

bridesmaids who planned ahead and bought enough oil for her lamp, or would I be one of the *foolish* ones who didn't and ended up missing out on the party?" Remember when I said some preachers *love* to preach on party parables like the Prodigal Son? Well some preachers *love* to preach on passages like the Ten Bridesmaids too. If you do it right, you can squeeze a few extra bucks out of folks to put in the offering plate.

I have to admit though, when I read this parable I feel the finger pointing at me - which I guess is what parables are supposed to do. They point the finger and ask hard questions. Who are you? What are you really living for? And if you want to head down *that* path, what would you *die* for? This parable gets us right where it hurts because this parable is written for *us* - the *insiders*. It's not about judgment for those *outside* the church, it's about those of us on the *inside*. The ten bridesmaids have all been invited to the wedding, and they've all said "Yes." They've all put on their bridesmaid's dresses and are waiting in the right place at the right time with their lamps all ready to go. It looks like they're all in. No one can tell the difference between them. But ... half of them *don't make it!* Uh-oh. "Is it *I*, Lord?" Here's the question I want to lay on the table this morning: "If the end of the world was for-sure coming tomorrow, how would you spend the last 24 hours before God comes?" In other words, how are we to live as God's people in a world of war and injustice and ... let's call it what it is ... *evil*?

Speaking of evil, let's address what happened last Sunday at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. Once again, just a little over a month from the last time it happened, a lone gunman using a gun that sure as heck wasn't intended for hunting, opened fire on a group of people in what would normally be considered a safe space. Twenty six people died this time. Twenty six men, women, and children. And once again, some of the responses from our leaders, including religious leaders have been unbelievably, mind-numbingly *stupid*. The ones that got under my skin the most went something like this: "Well, at least these people died in church. If there's any good place to get shot by a deranged gunman, church is the best place." And I will guarantee you

that today there has been and will be a fair share of preachers who will use *this* passage to scare and manipulate their church members into doing whatever they think they ought to be doing. They'll tell people how important it is to stay vigilant and prepared! Put everything else on hold! Stay awake! Watch and wait. Christ could come at any moment like a thief in the night! You wouldn't want to be caught napping now, would you? And you want to know what? It's bullshit. What's even worse is that there are actually people in churches today who are more offended by a preacher who says "bullshit" from the pulpit than they are about a deranged, evil man with an assault rifle killing innocent men, women, and children in a house of worship. That's the kind of evil I want to address today. Not the "don't drink, don't cuss, don't dance or listen to rock and roll music" sort of evil, but the big-picture kind of evil that makes you stop and question if there's any good in the world at all.

Back to the ten bridesmaids. Again, there was no difference as far as wakefulness goes among those women. They were all asleep when the bridegroom came calling. It was only when they woke up and went to trim the wicks on their lamps that you could see there was a difference. Five had invested in enough oil to keep their lamps burning, and five ran out of fuel. Five had enough for the wedding to start whenever the bridegroom arrived. Five only had enough for their own time table. Five were prepared, even if there was a delay; five were not.

Okay, so what's the difference? What is this preparedness all about? What is this oil that we need to make sure that we have an adequate supply? How does having or not having it set us apart as either fit for the Kingdom or unfit for the Kingdom? For Jesus it has precious little to do with what you believe in your head or what you say with your mouth. "Lord! Lord!" they cried, "Let us in." But the Lord says, "I do not know you." Then Jesus comes right out and lets us know what the parable means: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who *does the will* of my Father in heaven." In other words, God has no time for those who have their confession right but whose actions don't match their words.

Words are pretty easy. You can say something that you really don't mean. Shoot, we can even fake our actions too. Most of us can be kind and gracious for a little while, just out of sheer effort. But when the Kingdom is delayed, and you don't know when it's all going to go down, that's when the problems start. Maybe that's why so many Christians spend so much time trying to crack the secret code of the Bible in order to figure out exactly when the Kingdom will come. Because if we could know for sure that Jesus would return this time tomorrow, I'll bet *every one* of us could be astonishingly merciful and humble and generous for 24 hours. But we *don't* know! So *what about* the next day and the next? Being a "good kid" for a day is not nearly as demanding as being one who walks with Jesus day after day, month after month, year after year when conflicts just keep breaking out like brush fires. Being merciful for an afternoon can be quite pleasant in the right company. Heck, even in the wrong company most of us could pull it off. But being merciful for a *lifetime*? That's a different story. *Consistently* standing your ground against evil? That takes preparedness. No one can do that just by being determined. That takes a reconstruction of your soul. And the reconstruction of your soul doesn't just take commitment ... it takes time and space and prayerful living. It won't happen in the fifteen minutes it takes you to get home from church. You have to ask yourself some serious questions like, "Where does evil come from?" Does it come from a little red guy with a pitchfork that sits on my shoulder and tells me to do bad things? If that's the case, then evil has no agency and it exempts us from a whole lot of responsibility. But if we stop and consider the possibility that evil exists in the agency of *human autonomy and choice* ... then we have to ask some tough questions. Remember that old radio show "The Shadow?" The narrator would start the show with, "Who knows where evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!" If evil exists in the agency of human autonomy, then we have to ask, "Am *I* capable of doing this sort of evil?" This is why you need to come to Faith and Films ... that's one of the big themes we discussed when we watched the latest Spider-man movie. And yes, you heard me right -- *Spider-man!* We talked about

how the best movie villains are the ones who you can relate with all-too-well. The ones who make you reflect and say, "Yeah, I can see how this person went down that path. I'm just one lost job, one broken relationship, one terminally ill loved one, one ... *bad day* away from going off the deep end and doing something horrific in order to right all the wrongs I feel have been done to me."

So how do we keep from going off the deep end? We've got to keep that lamp oil stocked up folks. We need to be feeding our spirits. Ever hear that Native American story about the young man who was struggling with making good decisions, so he asked his wise grandpa how he managed to live such a good life? The grandpa said, "Well ... we all have two dogs living inside of us. One dog is noble, brave, kind, loving and generous. The other is violent, greedy, mean and selfish. Those dogs are always battling for control of our lives." The grandson says, "Well which dog wins?" The grandfather said, "The one you feed the most."

Sometimes these kinds of parables do *not* seem like good news to us in the church. They are calls to repentance ... to the long slow task of being transformed inwardly by the values of Jesus. They are the bad news that says that even if the Kingdom *doesn't* come for a thousand years, if you just did your time in church, and attend worship regularly, and say all the right things and pray all the right prayers, and put enough money in the offering plate or feed enough people at the Jesus Center, or *whatever* ... deep in the night you may be left outside desperately trying to fan a dying flame back to life if the oil of your spirit dries up. Don't ever think that you are immune to the evil that is potentially in you. Now I can say it -- Be ready. Be prepared. Watch and wait. Keep that oil flowing.