

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Ready or Not

Sunday, August 18

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Matthew 25:1–13

I came across a Letterman Top Ten list of things to say if you are caught sleeping at your desk. I'm not going to repeat them all, but here are a few: Excuse Number 10 was, "They told me when I gave blood that this might happen." Excuse Number 5 was "Darn, why did you interrupt me? I had almost figured out a solution to our biggest problem." Another was "Whew, I must have left the top off the White Out! You got here just in time!" The #1 best thing to say if you get caught napping at your desk was "... in the name of Jesus, Amen."

The moral? Always be prepared! Always be prepared for the unexpected in life. Better yet, don't fall asleep when it counts! It's like the old slogan of Starbucks: Life is short—stay awake!

Here's a question for you: Are you prepared for life? Are you ready for anything life throws at you? It's a critical question and your answer will determine who you become.

Basketball coach Bobby Knight is a controversial figure. He's certainly made a lot of mistakes. But one thing you can't argue with is his success as a basketball coach. A while back Coach Knight was interviewed on the television show "60 Minutes." The commentator asked him, "Why is it, Bobby, that your basketball teams are always so successful? Is it the will to succeed?" "The will to succeed is important," replied Bobby Knight, "but I'll tell you what's more important—the will to prepare. It's the will to go out there every day training and building those muscles and sharpening those skills!" As the old saying goes, "If you fail to prepare, prepare to fail."

Do you have a will to prepare? Do you feel your life, faith, and character are ready for whatever tomorrow may bring? I've been thinking about this question a lot lately in light of the church shooting in Texas last week. Life is fragile and unpredictable. The only predictable thing about life is that it is unpredictable. Life will throw

you curve balls and test every facet of your being. Are we prepared for it?

I used to complain about the obstacles and challenges of life. But the older I get, the more I see that the obstacles are my life. Through overcoming challenges and obstacles, I find purpose and meaning. I have a choice: I can either dread the obstacles and complain or I can prepare for the obstacles and grow.

If you are not sure if you are fully prepared for what's around the corner, don't worry. There is still time to prepare. I have a message for you that is going to prepare you for anything. I want to draw your attention to a story Jesus told about being prepared. The lesson of this story is so strong that if you apply it, you will be ready for anything life gives you. The story is about a group of bridesmaids who were late to a wedding. Take a look:

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." –Matthew 25:1–13

I can appreciate this parable from Jesus because I'm not a fan of people being late for weddings. I do a lot of weddings and things run a lot smoother if everyone is on time. In fact, when we plan weddings here at PCC, we tell people to arrive 30 minutes early for the rehearsal and at least an hour early for the ceremony.

Weddings today are different than in Jesus' day. Brett Blair writes, "Today weddings are announced for a specific time and place. But in first-century Palestine, a wedding could happen anytime within several days. The uncertainty was considered a part of the excitement of the wedding. The bridegroom actually hoped to catch some of the bridal party sleeping or napping. But fairness required that some announcement be made. So just before the big event a messenger was sent through the streets shouting: 'Behold the bridegroom is coming!' The alert ones in the wedding party would respond and go party, and the others would be left behind." You snooze, you lose.

In Jesus' parable, the announcement of the bridegroom came at midnight. This was fairly common. Most bridegrooms chose to come late at night because it was doubly surprising for the wedding party. When the late announcement came, Jesus said five of the bridesmaids were foolish and five of them were wise. The foolish ones did not have enough oil in their lamps to get through the night. The wise ones had an additional supply. One group was prepared; the other group was not.

I want to share a few insights from this parable that I learned studying this parable and doing research for this sermon:

Some Things in Life Cannot Be Borrowed

The five foolish bridesmaids were foolish because they thought that they could rely on the resources of others to get them through. They discovered that there are some things in life that cannot be borrowed. You and I cannot live on someone else's oil.

I remember a lady coming to see me in another church I served several years ago. She was frantic. She told me that she and her family had come to our church at Easter a few years back and that she meant to get more involved but her husband traveled a lot on business and she was busy with work and kids. When I asked what

was wrong she said, "I need some answers! I don't know what to do. My husband is an alcoholic and lost his job. One of my kids is hanging out with the wrong crowd and got kicked out of school for drugs. I am so mad! I don't understand it. I thought that if you thought positive and did good things, nothing bad would ever happen to you! What kind of God would let this happen? I need to know right now how all this faith stuff works. I have an hour so give me whatever you've got."

I tried to help the lady but there was only so much I could do in an hour. I could not hand her my faith. She wanted to borrow my oil at the last minute, but it doesn't work that way. You can't take a crash course in the Christian faith. You can't borrow oil from others. You have to get your own oil. You have to grow your own personal faith.

So often people see faith as a self-help book they can just take off the shelf or a pill they can take that'll be a quick fix. And Jesus says to each of us, "I don't want you to know about me. I want you to know me. I don't want you to follow principles. I want you to follow me. I am not a quick fix; I am a relationship."

Others can invite us to church and give us a Bible. They can encourage us. They can pray for us. They can give us advice and guidance. But in the end we must embrace faith ourselves. We must encounter Jesus personally.

Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? Not, are you religious? Not, do you go to church every once in a while? Not, do you try to be a good person? But do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? It is only that relationship which will prepare and sustain you in life.

Some Things in Life Cannot Be Put Off Until the Last Moment

When the foolish bridesmaids attempted to buy more oil, it was too late. The wedding had already started and the door to the party was shut.

We all know that there are some things we can't do at the last minute. We can't buy hurricane insurance when a hurricane is minutes away. We can't get ready for a mid-term exam the night before the exam. We can't decide to save for retirement a year before we retire. Yet it is amazing to me how so many of us fail to grasp this concept when it comes to even bigger decisions.

I can relate with Brett Blair who says that he has seen too many too many couples over the years who don't

make faith a priority and they run to the church as a last resort in a crisis. They are disappointed when it doesn't help. I have seen much of the same thing in ministry over the years—people who never become active in a church. Other things take priority: ball games, golf trips, the morning paper. Then the marital problems come or some other crisis and they are panicked. They run to the church to fix it and then they wonder why it doesn't work. As someone once said, "You cannot make withdrawals until you make deposits." There are some things that cannot be put off until the last moment.

I heard a story about a family who wanted their pastor to counsel their daughter who was making poor decisions. The pastor visited with the daughter for a half hour and did his best guide her in the right directions. Yet, she still kept making the same mistakes. Afterward, the mother said to the pastor that she was disappointed he had not been able to have any success with her daughter. She said, "I thought that you, of all people, would be able to turn her in the right direction." He said to her: "How can you expect me to accomplish in 30 minutes what you are not able to accomplish after 30 years."

A strong faith in Christ is built over time. It is a sacred process. You can't just grab it at the last minute when you finally realize it is important. This is why we focus on regular worship attendance, Bible study, prayer, and other spiritual disciplines. We do it so that when crisis hits your life, you are prepared. We emphasize good spiritual habits so that your life is built on a solid foundation and can withstand the storms of life.

Journalist Sarah Jennings sought to find the reason why some people can thrive in the midst of trouble and others can't. You know what she found to be the number-one reason why some people thrive in crisis? Their faith in God! She found that people who survive and thrive in the midst of trouble hold to two certain beliefs: God will sustain them in the midst of trouble and God will transform their trouble into something good, positive, and useful (*The Survivors Club: Finding Faith to Carry You Through Disaster*, Sarah Jennings, Crosswalk.com, Family Editor).

Opportunity Does Not Wait for the Unprepared

When the foolish bridesmaids finally bought their oil and arrived at the wedding, it was too late. The door was shut. They could not go in. They missed their opportunity.

Opportunity does not wait for the unprepared. This is true for every area of life. Amazing opportunities pass us by all the time because we are not prepared to seize them. So often God gives us opportunities to make things better, to realize a dream, to save a marriage, to improve our health, to make a change, to start a ministry, to grow in our faith, and sometimes those opportunities are given only once or only last a short window of time and then they are gone. We can only make excuses for so long before that opportunity is gone forever.

I think whoever wrote the definition of procrastination in Webster's dictionary was inspired by this parable from Jesus. Webster defines procrastination this way: "To delay until an opportunity is lost." "Nothing is more expensive than a missed opportunity" (H. Jackson Browne).

One of the myths of procrastination is that you will always have the time and opportunity to make the changes you need to make or do what you need to do. And that is not always true. Lost time is never found. Lost opportunities are never found.

A poignant example of this is reconciling with loved ones. I'll never forget a letter I came across that was written to that grand lady of literature Ann Landers:

Don't Wait to "Reconciliate"

"Dear Ann Landers: This is for all those people holding senseless grudges against other family members. After my father died, I had a fight with my brother about Dad's estate. It escalated and resulted in no communication for several months. After hearing a sermon on letting go, I called my brother. He was shocked but pleased to hear from me. The next day, he sent roses. We rebuilt our relationship. Five months ago, my brother died in a freak kayaking accident. I am so grateful we were back on track. Please tell your readers, Ann, to just do it. Pick up the phone. You never know when it will be too late. —MISSING HIM IN CALIFORNIA

What kind of opportunities is God giving you today? A nudge to call an estranged loved one and forgive them and reconcile with them? A spouse who is asking you to help save your marriage? A physical symptom that you need to get checked out at the doctor? A conviction in your heart to start a ministry of some kind? A dream that won't let you go? A moment of clarity about a bad habit or a sin in your life? A look in your child's eyes telling you how much she wants more time with you? A stirring

in your soul to receive Christ as Savior and develop a relationship with him?

I believe God sends us signals and invitations all the time to make the changes we need in life. Those signs and signals can come through a person, a feeling, a sermon, scripture, but they don't last forever. Sometimes those opportunities last only a very short amount of time.

David Rogne tells of a tree nursery in Ontario, Canada, that has a sign that reads: "The best time to plant a tree was 25 years ago ..." Rogne says this is "a sobering jolt that reminds one that trees take a long time to mature. Some oak trees, for example, are sixty years old before they bear any acorns."

But that isn't the whole story of that sign in the Canadian nursery. The complete message is: "The best time to plant a tree was 25 years ago. The second best time is today." "That sign is a reminder that the opportunity is still open. A tree can still be planted, in

spite of the squandered opportunities of 25 years ago. The door is still open, and as long as it is, there is still opportunity to act" ("Always Ready").

Today you can: Mend a broken relationship. Get right with God. Make amends for the wrong you have done. Pray and read your Bible. Go see a counselor. Don't wait until it is too late.

At every funeral I read a special prayer out of my book of worship. A line in that prayer reads, "Lord, enable us to live as those who are prepared to die, so we can die as those who go forth to live, so that, living or dying, our life may be in you." Are you prepared?

I am grateful to Brett Blair's message "The Tragedy of the Unprepared Life." It was a helpful resource for me as I prepared this sermon.



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