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Are We Preparing?

If I'm being honest, there are days when I am just a few clicks away from going down the path of becoming a prepper – the slang name for people who are ready to live off the grid and have a year's worth of food in the basement. My social media algorithm knows this and will send me videos of people stocking up their pantries or people talking about the differences between generators. My husband knows I'm on the edge when gallon jugs of water start showing up in the basement or a big pack of new batteries or long lasting candles come into the house. Sometimes this impulse is in response to a natural disaster or some other scary thing on the news. Sometimes it is just my anxiety finding an outlet. I've always stopped before it gets very far, but I definitely get the temptation.

I don't mean to say there is anything wrong with being prepared. Preparation is wise. Jesus himself commends it. But I have noticed that there are two very different places a person can prepare from. You can prepare from fear, where every purchase is a small attempt to buy off the thing you dread. Or you can prepare from courage, where you get ready because you trust that you can meet whatever comes, and you want to meet it well.

One is about preparing by hoarding a lot of things and figuring out how to fend off imagined doomsday events. The other is about building a resilient life that is prepared for whatever may come.

I saw an interview with author Jacob Weisberg this week that really stayed with me. His new book is called *Profiles in Cowardice*. The book is an inversion of John F. Kennedy's book "Profiles in Courage" and it looks at specific powerful people called to make principled choices under pressure who failed to do so. In the interview was a quote from author Iris Murdoch which said: "by the time a great moral choice arrives, most of the choosing has already been done." That resonated true to me. In other words: the big moments of our lives, when they come, are mostly a revealing of what we have already decided in a thousand small, unnoticed moments, some of them courageous and some of them cowardly.

Which brings us to today's parable. We have ten bridesmaids, who, as part of the first century custom, were waiting to welcome the bridegroom to his wedding. They are meant to go out to meet him when he arrives and bring him into the festivities. Five bridesmaids brought extra oil for their lamps. Five brought enough to last for the time

until they thought the bridegroom would show up. But he is late. They all fall asleep. When he finally arrives five of their lamps are out of oil. They ask for some from the others who say no and send them out to find some, at midnight. By the time they come back, it is too late and they are locked out.

Now, it helps me to remember that parables are not meant to be straightforward. Preacher Will Willimon writes: “The parables are not annoying riddles but rather a complex, dynamic means of talking about a complex, dynamic subject: God.”

And that helps because it is certainly true of this parable. There are so many interpretations, so many questions raised. The question that has often bothered me most is why don’t the bridesmaids share? The wise bridesmaids who have enough oil? Why don’t they just give the others some of their oil? Everything else we know about Jesus tells us that generosity is the point. Why does the story seem to reward what looks like stinginess?

But I came across a reading this week that made sense of it for me. What if the wise bridesmaids aren’t being stingy? What if this is a story about the things no one else can do for us? Some preparation can only be done by the person who needs it. Oil like that can’t be handed across the aisle at midnight.

I remember a class I signed up for in college. I needed a science requirement and I signed up for geology. I apologize to those of you who studied geology for my ignorance of the time in thinking maybe it would be easy. I had heard the phrase “rocks for jocks” so I was confident I could do fine in this class. I was so confident that I didn’t make it to all the lectures. So confident I figured I could cram the night before the first test without having been doing the reading along the way. And I had a friend in the class who on that night before the first exam, tried to tell me what she knew and impart her learning.

The next day I showed up for the exam, mind you, still confident that, since I was a good test taker I’d be fine. I took the paper and started reading the questions. And I’ll tell you that I couldn’t even make enough sense out of the words on the page to tell you which were the nouns and which were the verbs in the questions. There was so little I knew on the page, so many words I’d never seen before, that I erased my name, turned a blank page back in and went straight to the bursar’s office to drop that class.

I was not prepared. By the time I started preparing, it was just honestly too late. And here’s the thing: my friend was generous. She tried to hand me everything she knew. It just couldn’t be done that way. Understanding half a semester of college geology isn’t something you can borrow the night before. Ultimately, a geology class I could drop was a low-stakes way to learn this lesson, not that I haven’t had to learn it in other ways too. Because the times that matter most usually don’t come with a syllabus or a date on the calendar.

I'm guessing that since you're here this morning, and since most of you are here most Sundays, you are the kind of person who hopes you will make good choices when it matters. You will be prepared. You hope you would never hurt someone, or choose greed or power or fame over the greater good. You hope that when the big moments come, you'll choose courage and love.

And I hope that, too. But if I'm honest, I'm not always sure I would. None of us are. That gap between who we hope to be and who we are is part of why we gather here. Yes, we come to worship and praise God. But we also come to prepare, so that we can become people who make good choices, guided by God's wisdom and word.

Let's think for a minute about how we are preparing together because it is a little different way to think about worship. In worship, we sing together and pray in unison to prepare ourselves to share our voices with each other. We confess together to prepare ourselves to know how to admit when we have done something wrong and how to be honest about it. We wrestle with parables like this one, and with other teachings in scripture, to prepare ourselves to be able to take ancient wisdom handed down through generations and figure out how to apply it to our lives today. We remind ourselves of the value of spiritual gifts like: courage, forgiveness, faith, love, in order to prepare ourselves to use them in a world that often belittles them. We prepare by asking hard questions, the biggest questions, and admitting our doubts to each other, so we know it's ok to do that in other places too. We prepare by reminding ourselves of our inherent worth, our created goodness, our belovedness, and how that is true for everyone else both in this sanctuary and out there. And then we go out into the world hoping to take those preparations with us - to be people who share our voices, admit when we are wrong, wrestle with difficult questions, and see each other's worth and goodness.

Some Sundays these things apply clearly and directly to our lives - we know just what they are preparing for. But, a lot of the time, our time together here, in prayer and in community, is preparing us in particular ways that we will not know we need, until we need it. Because we can give each other a lot. But no one can give you the insights that come from a lifetime of prayer. No one can give you the kind of relationships forged by showing up week in and week out, even when you did not feel like it and didn't always like everyone. No one can give you the courage to do the big hard thing if you have not prepared by doing countless small hard things.

Pastor Will Willimon puts it this way: "Another's faith can be an impetus for your own, but like a fragile summer plant, it cannot be transplanted…It is not faith until it is your faith."

That is the oil the wise bridesmaids could not hand over.

Which brings me to the other way this parable gets preached. Often it's used to instill fear of being left out in the darkness like the foolish bridesmaids. Whether that darkness is read as hell in the afterlife or hell on earth, the takeaway becomes: prepare, or you'll end up out there. It sounds like a threat and it invokes the same kind of fear that fills my basement with water jugs: prepare so you won't be the one left out in the dark.

But I don't think that's the best reading. When the foolish bridesmaids go to find oil, the bridegroom arrives. The ones who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

Later, the foolish bridesmaids return. "Lord, lord," they say, "open to us."

And the bridegroom answers: "I do not know you."

That is one of the hardest lines in the Gospels. And it has often been preached as though the bridegroom were an angry God who takes pleasure in shutting people out. Author John Fairless offered me a different perspective. He says that the bridegroom doesn't know them *in that moment* because they weren't where they were supposed to be. They had gone chasing after oil instead of waiting at the door. They missed the moment of recognition. The relationship isn't denied in principle. A particular moment of meeting was missed, because they hadn't prepared to be ready when it came. That doesn't make the shut door painless. It makes it a warning about preparation, not a verdict on worth. It's a reminder that readiness is something that's formed over time, not something you do in the moment. Readiness is not about being constantly afraid of what might happen. It is about developing a faith that sustains us when things happen that we cannot control.

Which is why all the preparation matters. The prayer you've been praying, more or less faithfully, for years. The Scripture you've been reading, sometimes well and sometimes barely. Showing up here on Sunday even on mornings you didn't feel like it. The quiet acts of love you've offered over and over without recognition. The slow work of being formed by the Holy Spirit into someone who looks, a little more each year, like Christ.

None of that is wasted. None of it is small. It is oil.

At the end of the parable Jesus tells the disciples, "Keep awake." But notice that all ten of them fell asleep, even the wise ones. Being ready isn't staying anxiously alert. None of us can do that forever. It's what we've gathered long before we fall asleep that matters.

So let's be people who prepare, but prepare from a place of courage and not fear. Prepare, so that when the big moments come, most of our choosing has already been

done. Prepare, not because you are afraid, but because you want to meet this life with the courage and love you've seen in Jesus and because you believe in a God who meets us. In the waiting. In the middle of the night. In the ordinary days we spend gathering oil, long before we know what we're gathering it for.

Amen.