

"A LESSON FROM FIVE MAIDENS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION Ten young ladies were on their way to a wedding. Five of them were wise and had prepared for the trip, making sure they had enough oil to fuel their lamps. Five maidens were foolish. Their minds were on other things. It was still light when they left home, but now darkness was settling. And,

The bridegroom was delayed. Their lamps were running out of oil and they had none in reserve. So they asked the five wiser maidens if they could borrow some oil from them, but they were refused. "Go see if you can buy some from a dealer", was the reply of those who brought oil. And so the foolish maidens ran out into the village to try to find oil for their lamps and while they were gone the bridegroom came and when they returned to the feast, the doors were shut and they could not get in!

DEVELOPMENT William Barclay tells us that the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens is based on no fairy tale. Even today middle class families in Palestine celebrate weddings just as Jesus described them 2,000 years ago, and still we can imagine that there are some who miss out on the feast.

J. Alexander Findley tells of what he observed on a trip to Palestine. Said he,

"When we were approaching the gates of a town, I caught sight of ten maidens gaily clad and playing some kind of musical instrument, as they danced along the road in front of our car; when I asked them what they were doing, my guide told me that they were going to keep the bride company till the bridegroom arrived.

I asked him if there was any chance of seeing the wedding, but he shook his head, saying in effect, 'It might be tonight, or tomorrow night, or in a fortnight's time...that nobody ever knows for certain'. Then he went on to explain that one of the great things to do, if you could, at a middle-class wedding in Palestine was to catch the bridal party napping. So the bridegroom comes unexpectedly, and sometimes in the middle of the night."

The question for this morning is: are you prepared? Do you have oil for your lamp? After all, who knows what tomorrow may bring? Who knows what kind of a severe test we may have to confront? Who knows what kind of a door might open? Are you ready? Who knows if we'll even have a tomorrow? The point is that the bridegroom comes unexpectedly. Are you prepared? Several questions come to mind as we reflect upon the meaning of this ancient Parable of Jesus.

THE MOST OF OUR OPPORTUNITIES

One is this: are you making the most out of the opportunities that God has given you?

Motivational speaker, Zig Ziglar, tells about a very successful jewel thief back there in the Roaring Twenties by the name of Arthur Berry. It seems that

Berry liked to "hobnob" with the rich and famous of Boston's elite, except that he did his "hobnobbing" at night when they weren't around. He wouldn't steal from just anybody. As a matter of fact, a visit from Arthur Berry was a bit of a status symbol among the ladies of Boston's uppercrust. The police weren't nearly as intrigued by his status-oriented thievery, however, and one night they caught him...shot him three times. He fell through a glass window, and shattered glass stuck in his body and he lay on the ground in great pain. Not surprisingly, he came to a conclusion amidst the blood, the glass and the handcuffs, muttering...."I ain't going to do this anymore!"

Anyway, to make a long story short, Arthur eventually got out of prison two decades later and settled down in a quiet New England town. There he became a respected citizen, even leading a local veteran's organization. But it finally leaked out into the press that this notorious jewel thief was holed up in this tiny New England hamlet and the nation's media arrived in droves. One young reporter asked Arthur Berry this question:

"Mr. Berry....you stole from a lot of wealthy people in your life as a jewel thief. Let me ask you: from whom did you steal the most?"

And without a moment's hesitation Arthur Berry replied:

"That's the easiest question I've ever been asked. The man from whom I stole the most was Arthur Berry. You see, I could have been a baron on Wall Street. I could have been a successful business man, had I utilized my God-given talents and developed them legitimately. I could have made it big in business, but I spent two-thirds of my adult life behind bars."

Arthur Berry - a jewel thief who stole from himself. He failed to use the God-given talents and opportunities at his disposal and it haunted him the rest of his life. Ask yourself: if the bridegroom were to come tonight and ask you to give an account of your life, could you say that you had taken complete advantage of the opportunities given you? Be honest with your answer.

FAITHFUL IN SERVICE TO GOD AND MAN

service to God and your fellow man?

Let me narrow the question a little more. Have you^u been faithful in your

The year was 1780. In New England there was an eerie dark day that frightened many people. At noon it was as dark as early night. The birds, as confused as the people, sang a final twilight song and fluttered off into the evening dusk. The cows came meandering home from the pasture and chickens came home to roost. Religious men fell on their knees and begged a final blessing before the end came. In Hartford, the State Legislature was in session and someone moved adjournment thinking that the Day of Judgement had come. But then a legislator stood up and said,

"I am against adjournment. The Day of Judgement either is approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore candles to be brought."

The legislature approved his request. Have you been faithful in your service to God and your fellow man....loyal to your Church and its needs? If the bridegroom were to come would He find you at your post? Again, be honest in answering.

EMBARRASSED OR ASHAMED AT HIS COMING

A third question to consider. Is there anything in your life about

which you would be embarrassed or ashamed at His coming?

The great preacher, Jonathan Edwards, believed in the principle that Jesus was lifting up in this parable so strongly that he felt compelled to put it down on paper in the form of a resolution. This was it:

"Resolved: to live with all my might while I do live.
Resolved: never to lose one moment of time, to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can. Resolved: never to do anything out of revenge. Resolved: never to do anything which I should be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life."

A mother wrote to Catholic Digest saying that one day when she was heading up the stairs with a basket containing the last load of folded clothes, hearing her three little ones in front of her for bedtime, her oldest child, Patty, who was then in Kindergarten, picked that moment to begin one of those questions that seem to intrigue all children at some time. She asked,

"Mommy....if it were the end of the world and everyone was getting ready to die....."

The mother stopped, shifted the basket on her hip, sensing an important question was coming and offering a quick prayer for wisdom to give the right answer to the question she felt was coming...."yes"....the mother prodded her daughter. The little girl then finished her theological inquiry:

"Mommy...if the end of the world came, would you have to take your library books back?"

That five year old young lady did not want any unfinished business in her life. How about you? Is there some unfinished business in your life that needs to be taken care of? Anything about which you would be embarrassed or ashamed if the bridegroom were to come today? Be honest with your answer. Any unfinished business?

DO PEOPLE YOU LOVE KNOW YOU APPRECIATE THEM?

Here's another important question concerning the un-

certainty of our tomorrows that we need to reflect upon: do people you love know just how much you appreciate them?

Sometimes we wait too long to say, "I love you", or "please forgive me", or just a simple "thank you".

William Stidger was a businessman who experienced a shattering emotional breakdown. His energies were depleted. His enthusiasm for life had vanished. He was terribly down...terribly depressed. He sought help, but did not progress. Days passed. One day an insightful friend said to William:

"When was the last time you singled out one of your acquaintances who has been gracious to you and expressed appreciation...."

That question frankly annoyed him, but he went home that evening and in the isolation of his living room he selected some stationary and, for the first time in two decades, he remembered a High School English teacher. He had not even thought of her in years, but she had taken a bit of an interest in him. She had helped him to discover a love for poetry that he didn't know he had. She imagined that he might be worth something after all. He wrote her a simple letter. Three days later, by return mail, a letter came to him from her. In the tremulous handwriting of a long retired teacher she wrote,

"My eyes are blinded with tears as I write. You are the first student in all my career who has ever written me a letter to express thanks." (She continued) "I will keep it as long as I live".

With her response to his letter in mind he thought of someone else. And so he wrote another letter and then another. He didn't even notice when he got well, as he discovered the joy of expressing his love and gratitude to others.

Friend....if you knew the bridegroom was coming today, are there some people to whom you would want to express your appreciation of love? Who knows what tomorrow may bring? Why not do it now...today. This afternoon.

STRANGER OR LIFE-LONG ACQUAINTANCE

And one final question concerning the coming of the bridegroom. Would He find you a stranger or a life-long acquaintance?

When Queen Mary of Orange was about to die, they say that her chaplain wished to console her with some reading from the Bible. He was concerned whether she was prepared for this journey. She replied, "I have not left the matter till this hour". She was ready...prepared. An old Scotsman expressed the same sense of assured preparedness as he faced Eternity. As a friend offered him some sayings at the end, this Scotsman replied, "I thatched my house when the weather was warm". He, too, was ready. Let me repeat that.

We have no idea when the bridegroom is coming. But it pays, my friend, to be prepared. It pays to have that sense of urgency that says that it might be at any moment. I'm reminded of that sign on the side of an old English church:

I read this week that the National Football League did a study on scoring in the NFL and discovered that in the last two minutes of the first half and the final two minutes of the second half, more points are scored than in any other twenty minutes of the football game. So imagine if you would that the bridegroom is coming today.

Have you been faithful in your service to God and your fellow man, in your expressions of love and loyalty to your Church? Have you gotten rid of anything in your life of which you might be embarrassed or ashamed? Can you think of any persons to whom you ought to express some words of love and appreciation? And finally, how is your relationship with the bridegroom Himself? Is He still a stranger to you or do you know Him as the best friend you've ever had?

The weatherman on Channel 9 mentioned recently that some folks out in Iowa read in the weather forecast column of their local newspaper that "There is a 90% chance.....of tomorrow!" Something was left out. I personally hope that the chances are far better than that. But then - who knows? Let's not be foolish and leave something out of our lives. And let's remember this Parable of the Five Maidens who weren't prepared. And let's all try to be like the five who were. They covered all the bases and were ready for the bridegroom. So may it be with you and you and you...all of you.

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence in these quiet moments, O God. Remind us that the least important fact of life is the score at half time. Help us to hear Your voice speaking softly now in our hearts...urging us to be better prepared. Deepen our commitment to Christ - the Bridegroom...that we may be ready when He comes. For it is in Him that we see life's highest hope as well as its deepest meaning. In His name we now pray. Amen.

"Everytime I pass this church
I pay a little visit,
So when at last I'm carried in,
The Lord won't say, 'Who is it?'"

PASTORAL PRAYER: November 11, 1990

WE THANK YOU, O GOD, for life and light and for all things good!

For home, for work, for play, for worship.
For baseball and football, for running and jogging and walking.
For dear friends in whose affection we find a sense of
life and laughter, warmth and worth.
For time's ability to heal old wounds and bitter hurts.

WE THANK YOU, LORD!

AND AGAINST ALL that would crush it and destroy it, we thank you, O God,
that we still believe in that Kingdom Jesus saw, and
taught and for which He died on a Cross.

That even in those dark stretches of life when it would appear that evil has triumphed, we keep discovering clues that point us in Your direction and remind us that You are still very much at the helm.

For the power and pull of the Scriptures in our lives.
For the Church - not yet without its spots and wrinkles.
For modest victories over sin and self-centeredness.
And chiefly for Yourself - revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth -
Our Lord, our Example, our Redeemer - we now bless and
praise Your holy name.

HELP US TO LEARN FROM YOU - who never art in a hurry, yet never late.

Bless us with Your poise, something of Your peace and power.
Bless us individually and together with a moving experience
of Your presence that the fire and determination within
our hearts may vitalize our worship and energize
our work.

HELP US TO wash one another's feet, rather than always putting stones into
one another's shoes.

AND SUCH IS THE NATURE of our life, O God, and so sorely have we been deceived
that we can go for days and weeks without stopping to offer and
pray an honest prayer...

Sealing ourselves off from mystery.
Relying heavily on our native skills.
Postponing life's big questions, avoiding decisions.
Staying busy - getting, spending, running. We have a
way of making You, Our God, an expendable extra in
our busy lives. Now, in this worship experience:

Surround us with Your spirit.
Surprise us with Your joy.

Strengthen us in Your word,
Send us forth renewed with
love and faith in our hearts.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, November 11, 1990

VISITORS / GREETING

- A. A word of welcome to the visitors...pleased you're here, and hope we'll have the opportunity to greet you...either at the door as you depart, or downstairs at the coffee hour which is a good "lead-in"...a good place "to get started" in getting to know the church.
- B. Be free in the sharing of your name. Fill out....sign a GB. Join us in worship on other Sundays...come, work with us, too, in the programs of outreach that gone on around here....
- C. Our church has deep roots in the soil of this city...doing the Lord's work here since 1837...4th building...we minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit that we..
- D. Members: wear your name tags downstairs at the coffee time. Visitors: if you're interested in learning more about the church before you leave, come to the chancel steps here and one or two of our members will be glad to tell you about the good things that go on here from week to week.

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Be sure to pick up your copy of the monthly news sheet in the narthex...or downstairs in the Russell Room.
- B. Parish concerns are listed in the bulletin...review them in these moments....we neglected to say that Christmas cards are on sale again today at the coffee hour. Lucy Dinnes w ll be glad to take your order. Also, we didn't mention that a number of the members of the Adult Fellowship are away this weekend on a retreat in the Catskills.
- C. A busy time...lot going on...Church Fair is next Saturday and we ask that you give your "Fair" share...time or donation... to help make it successful. Big event of the year and a happy event, too...fun and time of good fellowship. Fair proceeds go out to the community...support about 10 different concerns.
- D. Today is Dedication Sunday....the Sunday when we present our pledges of financial support for the coming year to the church. To date we have gratefully received pledges, totalling toward our goal of 225 pledges and \$ 140,000. We shall share in the Litany of Dedication following the Doxology.

OFFERING

"More blessed to give than it is to receive".
In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering...our gifts and our tithes.