

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Be Prepared”  
Thomas G. Speers, III  
November 12, 2017

Lesson: Matthew 25:1-13.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian, used to say that all young children are both isolationists and imperialists: “My toys are my toys and your toys are my toys too!”<sup>1</sup> Against that almost instinctual possessiveness, most of us have been taught and continue to teach the importance of sharing. Share your toys. Share your candy. If we’ve heard it once, we’ve heard it a thousand times. Share. In the church, we proclaim that we are all called to share our time; share our money, our gifts, our abilities.

Sharing is such a central part of our heritage that it comes as something of a surprise to hear the story told today. There were ten bridesmaids who went out to meet the bridegroom, probably to escort him and the bride as they went on to their new home where there would be wonderful festivities. Well, the bridegroom was delayed and the bridesmaids fell asleep. Suddenly, at midnight there came the cry: “Look! Here is the bridegroom!” So they were up, quick as a flash, only to discover that during the wait their lamps had nearly gone out. Five of the bridesmaids had brought extra oil and quickly refilled their lamps. The other five asked: “Give us some of your oil.” But they refused: “There won’t be enough. You go and get some for yourselves.” And while they were away, the bridegroom came and those who were ready went into the wedding banquet. Later the other bridesmaids arrived at the wedding feast. They could hear the sounds of the party, but the door was shut and they could not get in. And Jesus says: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” Be prepared.

My grandfather once spoke of a group of statues that depict this story, where one of the bridesmaids is asking for oil and another is turning her head and saying “no.” According to my grandfather, Oliver Wendell Holmes once studied that statue and said eventually: “She should have given her some.” That surely is the way many of us have felt. She should have shared. And yet there are some things that cannot be shared at the spur of the moment. We can share our toys and we can share our money, we can share food, but we cannot, at the spur of the moment, share a long-developed relationship with God. That is something that grows and matures over time. We can’t say: “Here is faith in God; take it,” any more than some up and coming athlete could simply take the practice and experience of a star Elena Delle Donne and expect to play at her level overnight. We can point the way; we can share the joy we know in serving God, we can be coaches and trainers, but then they must develop their own relationship with God. We can lead the horse to water, but they have to drink themselves. There are some things we cannot share.

Some people have read this story as pointing towards “judgment day” either the day of Jesus’ triumphal return or the day we die and stand before the throne and give account of our lives. We don’t know when that is going to happen, so we are called to be prepared. Stay awake. You don’t know the day or the hour.

Yet this story also points to an on-going preparation for living. We know the way that life runs along smoothly, easily, and then suddenly we run into an unexpected opportunity, or temptation, or crisis or joy. When I was in High School, my family had the great experience of traveling through the Grand Canyon on the Colorado River in sixteen-foot wooden dories. It was an incredibly exciting time. We would travel along with the current, not needing to row, but simply enjoying the scenery. The water could be wonderfully calm, and then, all of a sudden, we would find ourselves about to enter an enormous rapid. If we, or more accurately our boatmen, had not been prepared, we would have been in real trouble. Life is like that. Day after day goes on like the day before. Eating and sleeping and working and playing, when all

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<sup>1</sup> Family Recollection from my father, T. Guthrie Speers, Jr.

of a sudden it is different. We are faced with a temptation or a tragedy. How will we respond? We all of us know people who have fallen completely to pieces after some crisis and perhaps even have asked us: I wish you could give me some of your faith. But we can't. We can share our love, we can be supportive, but we cannot share a long-developed relationship with God. That has to be cultivated over time.

Five of the maidens were ready and five were not. Professor Eugene Boring explains that readiness or preparedness in this gospel is "living the life of the kingdom, living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount."<sup>2</sup> That's a lifestyle that is developed over a lifetime. Jesus tells the story of an oil that we cannot get on the spur of the moment. We have to get it for ourselves.

The wise maidens had extra oil. Oil in Jewish tradition sometimes symbolizes good deeds, deeds of love and mercy in obedience to the great commandment. We are called to be merciful and loving, giving of ourselves in the service of God. Part of the reason that I challenge people in church to tithe, to be generous with their money in the service of God, is because when we do, we know blessings of incredible proportions, most particularly knowing that we are participating in God's work in the world. God's going to get God's work done without our help, but when we give generously of our whole selves, including our money, we get included in the celebrations. The door to the wedding feast is open to us. Oil sometimes symbolizes deeds of love and mercy. One way to get this oil for ourselves, to be prepared, is to live generously, full of love and mercy.

Sometimes oil is a symbol of the Torah, the law of God, the Holy Scripture. Regular reading, praying and studying of the Bible until its insights become a part of our lives is another way to be prepared for the emergencies and opportunities that come our way. This is so basic that sometimes people overlook it. Carl Sandburg wrote about Abraham Lincoln: "From his earliest reading days as a boy, Lincoln turned the pages of the Bible," and that continued throughout his life. His speeches and letters were "drenched with biblical references and learning."<sup>3</sup> I love particularly the story of Lincoln's Bible that he carried with him across the years and finally brought with him to the White House, and kept on his bedside table. After he was killed, a friend picked up that Bible, just to look at it, and found that it opened naturally, as a book will to the place where it has been opened often before, to the 27<sup>th</sup> Psalm: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" That surely was preparation for Lincoln for the kind of emergencies he had to face. "The Lord is my light and my salvation." Our Scriptures are a ready source of the oil that keeps our lamps burning.

Sometimes oil is a symbol of spiritual illumination. Prayer, regular prayer that is not so much words shot heavenward as it is the inner opening of our lives to God, prayer provides the very finest strength in times of trouble. Regular prayer, of listening for God, of even wasting time with God, gives meaning to the words of the Bible. Isaiah was right when he said that "those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength." Those who keep a regular on-going daily discipline of prayer can face any crisis, any temptation, any opportunity, because, as Dr. Fosdick suggests, they know that they are not a closed reservoir that can be exhausted, but rather a channel in touch with inexhaustible resources.<sup>4</sup> Regular prayer puts us in contact with the power of the universe. That kind of relationship with God can only be developed over time. It cannot be shared at the spur of the moment. Prayer provides the oil to keep our lamps burning bright.

My friend Doug Gerdt from down the road at First and Central Church sent out a note this past week that said in part: "I know...I know. I'm supposed to talk about the mass execution at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, TX, last Sunday...but I have no words. I don't know how to constructively add to the discourse and I just wrote and preached about mass shootings and guns a month ago when Las

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<sup>2</sup> M. Eugene Boring, Reflections on The Gospel of Matthew, in The New Interpreter's Bible. © 1994 Abingdon Press.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Sandburg, introduction in Lincoln's Devotional. Originally published in London: The believer's daily treasure. Religious Tract Society, 1852.

<sup>4</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, The Service of Religious Faith to Mental Health, in Riverside Sermons. © 1958 Harper & Brothers.

Vegas was the venue. No. I have no more words and feel no need to add to the cacophony.”<sup>5</sup> What he does add however is a story about a chemistry professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. In the aftermath of the shootings there, Professor MaryKay Orgill talked with her class about the shooting and how it had affected them. She mentioned something Martin Luther King, Jr. had said: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” She mentioned that quotation because it reminded her that “when terrible things happen I could lash out at the bad thing, or I could try to be a source of goodness and light.”

“Many tears were shed, including Orgill’s. With King’s words still in her mind, she went on with the thermodynamics lesson and explained Le Chatelier’s principle to her students: “A change in one of the variables that describes a system at equilibrium produces a shift in the position of the equilibrium that counteracts the effect of this change.” Professor Orgill suddenly recognized a connection between King’s quote and Le Chatelier’s principle and she invited her students to email her with ideas of how they thought the quotation and the principle were linked. Here is how one student answered:

“Today we learned that, according to Le Chatelier’s principle, when stress is applied to a system that moves it out of equilibrium, that system will shift to counteract that stress and reestablish equilibrium. Martin Luther King Jr.’s quote ... applies Le Chatelier’s principle by showing how when faced with great darkness and evil that damages daily life, the only way we can bring our lives back into equilibrium is by adding the opposite stress. The opposite stresses in this case would be light and love.”<sup>6</sup>

In a world that is altogether too full of anger and suffering, maybe the way we can keep our lamps full is by practicing love and adding light into the world.

So many of our days go on just like the day before, and then all of a sudden, it is different: the crisis, the opportunity, the test, comes. In the smoother, quieter times, be prepared. Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Let us pray: Help us O God to be prepared, living lives of service and generosity, lives drenched in the wisdom of Scripture, and lives enriched by the power of prayer, following the example of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Doug Gerdts, *Pizza It Forward* in First & Central Weekly E-Mail, November 9, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Bibiana Campos Seijo, Darkness and Light, in *c&en*, Volume 95 Issue 43, October 30, 2017. <https://cen.acs.org/articles/95/i43/Darkness-light.html> © 2017 American Chemical Society.