



**"Did I Hear a Door Close?"**

**Scripture – Matthew 25:1-13**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, November 12, 2023**

I seriously doubt I would have become chummy with the author of the Gospel of Matthew. He was enthralled with the theme of the coming judgment – the time when the faithful would enter God's realm but the unfaithful would be cast into the outer darkness. In Matthew's eyes you are either good or evil. You are wheat or *weeds*. You are sheep or *goats*. You are a Philadelphia Eagle or a *Dallas Cowboy*.

To better understand today's parable, it is imperative to know the context in which Jesus told it. It was the final week of his life. Jesus had bolstered his courage and marched into Jerusalem, the hotbed of his opposition. The powers of darkness were like threatening winds swirling through city streets. His enemies were calculating the precise moment to seize and silence him.

New Testament scholars point out that in Matthew's gospel, chapters 23, 24, and 25 form a lengthy speech in which Jesus hones in on the theme of judgment. Chapter 23 is a judgment aimed specifically at the Pharisees. Next, the speech broadens to a judgment on all of Jerusalem, and finally an all-encompassing judgment that no one will escape. The speech is an unnerving warning to everyone to live an authentic life devoted to deeds of kindness and mercy – or atrocity awaits you.

In first century Judaism there were heightened expectations that the end of the world was at hand. For two centuries prior to the birth of Jesus and continuing throughout the first century, apocalyptic teachings that focused on a cosmic battle between good and evil were widespread. Jews and Christians alike believed that Satan ruled the earth, evidenced especially in the oppressive pagan Roman Empire that occupied the land. It was the end of the world as they knew it.

Ironically, that was good news, because they believed that God would soon defeat the powers of darkness. This would usher in a realm of justice and mercy and peace. And who does not have that same yearning today as the death toll in Gaza keeps climbing skyward and the divisiveness in our own country keeps deepening?

The initial followers of Jesus believed that the first signs of God's realm were emerging in his ministry, and their hopes soared. But when he was arrested and crucified, their hopes plummeted. Next came the surprise of his resurrection and their hopes were rekindled. They believed that Jesus ascended into heaven, but that he would soon return to earth to usher in God's realm in all its glory.

And so they waited. And they waited. And the decades rolled by, and more and more of the initial followers of Jesus began to perish, yet there was no sign of him. The author of the Gospel of Matthew began to prepare his community for a delay in his return. Jesus might return any moment, but since no one knows the timetable, you must remain vigilant. Patience. Patience. You must be prepared.

Immediately preceding The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids is The Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants. In that parable, the master showed up sooner than expected. In today's parable, the bridegroom shows up later than anticipated. People in the first century probably believed that Jesus would literally return to earth. For us, it is the existential moment of our personal death. Ready or not, our final day is coming.

Dr. Vivian Bearing was a professor of poetry whose specialty was the seventeenth century. Her work was her life; academic achievement meant everything. She was widely recognized as an outstanding scholar; however, her life was devoid of friendships. Then, one day, she developed ovarian cancer, and it was not until her death was imminent, that she finally realized she had lived a life that had known very little kindness or intimacy.

She became painfully aware of how misdirected her life had been when she was lying in a hospital bed nearly unconscious, and a young doctor came into her room. The doctor was one of her former students, and he approached her illness as an opportunity for research and study, but little else. He was ambitious, insensitive, and callous. Like his patient he was clueless when it came to simple human kindness. The physician stood over her bed and talked to a nurse about his former instructor. He remarked that she was a brilliant teacher, who helped the students "forget all that poetic stuff; that meaning of life garbage," and instead focused on the complexity of language, sentence structure and John Donne's wit.

As the dying professor heard these words, it was as if a door slammed shut in her soul. She realized too late that life is more than the accumulation of knowledge or prestige. Lying in her hospital bed she reflected on all the opportunities she had missed to extend kindness to her students and colleagues, and tears streamed down her cheeks as she was overcome with regret.<sup>1</sup>

Today's parable is generally known as The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, but New Testament scholar, Alyce McKenzie suggests a better name – The Parable of the Closed Door.

Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. The wedding was being held at night and each of the bridesmaids carried an oil-burning lamp that they would use to light the path for the groom as they processed from his house to the place of the wedding. However, a problem arose when the groom failed to show up at the expected time.

The bridesmaids were forced to wait for him, and their wait lasted longer than they expected. Hours went by and the bridesmaids became drowsy; eventually, they fell asleep. Then, suddenly, someone shouted, "The groom is coming!" The startled bridesmaids jump to their feet as they realize the moment is upon them. They pull out their lamps and discover that the oil in them is nearly depleted. So, five of the bridesmaids pull out flasks of oil that they had brought and refill their lamps. However, the other five had not prepared for a delay and so they have no extra oil. They sprint through the streets desperate to find someone who could sell them oil. But while they are scrambling to secure it, the groom appears and is ready for the wedding to begin. The five bridesmaids whose lamps are burning brightly, usher the groom to the wedding and before the other five return, the door slams shut. They surely felt similar to the poetry professor who was dying of cancer and lamented, "It came so quickly, after taking so long."

We are often unprepared for what comes next in life. Most of us procrastinate. We may think we have plenty of time to develop a healthier lifestyle, or reconcile with a friend, or serve food to hungry people, or read significant books, or deepen our spiritual life.

How many of us know a situation similar to this? Her paternal grandmother lived to be ninety-five. Her father looked like her, so she assumed her dad would also live into his nineties. Until he got liver cancer at age seventy-four and died at age seventy-six. She felt robbed of twenty years with him. She is unable to express her appreciation to him or ask for his advice. She goes on: "We have all the time in the world to spend time with our kids. Except that somebody sped up the clock, and now their rooms are empty, and we have the sinking feeling that a ship has sailed that will never return to port."<sup>2</sup>

That's what today's parable underscores. It's an allegory in which Jesus is the bridegroom who is unexpectedly delayed. The ten bridesmaids represent his followers; the lamps are a reminder that people of faith are to be the light of the world. Our faithfulness in carrying out this task is what will be judged. The foolish bridesmaids forget this. They presume that everything will turn out fine while failing to play their role in making it happen.

Rory Naeve received a call from his mother. Her voice was high-pitched, and she was talking so quickly that he could tell something had happened. She was leaving the hospital where she works, making her way through the roundabouts when she saw a man in a hospital gown walking up a grassy hill next to the highway. She called a coworker and said, "I think a patient might be running away. I need security. Do you know their extension?"

Her friend replied, "I don't know it."

His mother said, "I don't either. Why don't I have it already saved on my phone?"

So, she pulls her car to the side of the road, looks up the number for security and calls. She tells them there is a patient very close to the highway. It's going to take a few minutes for security to arrive, but he's dangerously close to the highway.

So, she rolled down the window and said to the man, "Are you okay? You look like you're having a hard day."

The man replied, "No, I'm not okay."

The man had been in rehab for some time and his life had been very rough. After a few minutes of telling his story, he said, "Ma'am, I've been walking around here for the past ten minutes trying to get up the nerve to jump."

The woman said, "God doesn't want you to die today."

The man started crying. And the woman started crying. And the two of them cried together until security arrived and helped him back to the hospital.<sup>3</sup>

Those who are unprepared for the bridegroom are the ones who ignore the urgency and fail to act. Those who are prepared for the bridegroom are the ones who live as Jesus taught us to live – awake to the moment and prepared to act.

#### NOTES

1. Dan R. Dick describe Mike Nichols' film, "Wit" in *Lectionary Homiletics*, October/November, 2005.
2. Alyce McKenzie, *The Parables for Today*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 61.
3. Rory Naeve, "The Parable of the Ten Girl Scouts," *Day1.org*, November 12, 2023