

THE BOYSCOUTS GOT IT RIGHT

Matthew 25:1-13

November 6, 2011

There they are: 5 young women frantically running around late at night looking for a 24 hour convenience store that carries lamp oil. Incredibly they find it, and filling their lamps, they rush back to the wedding party, but it's too late.

Isn't that the way it is . . . too little, too late. You snooze, you lose. You found the window of opportunity, but someone had already nailed it shut. The familiar name used to describe the phenomenon is Murphy's Law. "If anything can go wrong, it probably will." Examples abound.

- Change is inevitable, except from a vending machine.
- Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he'll sit in a boat all day drinking beer.
- The flashlight is a metal tube used to store dead batteries.
- If you lined up all the cars in the world end to end, someone would be stupid enough to try to pass them 5 or 6 at a time on a hill in the fog.

Personally, despite the humor, it can describe an attitude that is not only negative but seems to attract calamity. If you're expecting life to deal you a bad hand, the likelihood is heightened that it will. What

about the converse of Murphy's Law: "If anything can go right, it probably will?" I prefer the latter; however, into every life some rain must fall . . . and the sun will shine. None of us gets all of one and none of the other, although it may seem so at times.

Our story/parable is a cautionary tale. It is straight-forward with a message that practical folks will applaud. The window of opportunity opens most for those who are prepared. There are some who hear the story and become a little anxious (maybe a lot). What if I miss it?! The motive of the parable is not to make some smug and some uneasy. It is to say: expect the unexpected; in this case, that God did not abandon us, but will return . . . but no one knows when.

The parable is unique to the Gospel of Matthew and is instruction addressed to the early church. There was the prevailing notion that when Christ told his disciples he would return, it would be imminent. Now it's decades later and still no triumphant return. We call the study and knowledge of such subjects eschatology or last things. The delay (now 2,000 years) would be cause for some dismay, disappointment, discouragement; complicated by those self-appointed prophets then (and now) who claim to have inside information and are only too happy to share it. This parable, and other New Testament teachings, are addressed to this tendency, born of anxiety and the desire to control, to them and all of us say don't be anxious. Be ready. Don't procrastinate or prognosticate. Trust . . . and in the meantime get and keep oil for your lamps. It becomes clearer when we recall oil is

a symbol for the Holy Spirit. Keep your faith burning brightly by being filled and refilled by the Spirit. The Boy Scouts got it right, but don't lock down on results as you expect or when you expect. No one can second guess God, but we can continue to grow, to reform, to live in the light we're given. The expectations must be open-ended.

In A.A. and Al-Anon, twelve step programs for recovery from addictive disease, they have an expression: "Expectations kick our . . . backsides." The point: it is common practice to work a program of recovery (12 steps) and pin our hopes on results we have in mind. In truth God often has something different, greater than we conceive. So, when we don't see our results, we are often crestfallen. But be of good cheer, God has a better result in mind. The kind of preparation we are to make can stand us well regardless of how things work out . . . and they will . . . work out . . . as God intends and when.

There's more here than meets the eye. Be prepared. Yes! Beware of those who claim to know it all, whether its eschatology . . . or just about anything. To be sure. Expect delay. Yes. Trust. Definitely! But there is more.

If preparation implies a coming future event that is delayed, what's called for along with preparation? Patience. Oh I was afraid he was gonna say that. That and humility are probably the least pursued virtues for modern people. Whether we're on hold waiting to speak to a live customer service rep, enduring a sluggish internet

connection or thumbing through the magazine at the doctor's office, delay frustrates us to the point of distraction, restlessness, rudeness and road rage. We want fast – fast food, communications, travel, traffic lights, service, weight loss and answers. "Are we there yet?" An entire movement has sprung up to counter this obsession. It's called slow food . . . nutritious, prepared, not nuked, local. In the face of our quest for fast answers to prayer, quick results, immediate change, guess what? God is not in a frantic hurry. You see there is usually a lot more than our desired result at stake. To give you what you want may not be a good thing. To give you what you need may require substantial shifts in the lives of many. To give you what God wants you to have requires growth; substantial growth is rarely instantaneous.

Finally, though not exhaustively, did you wonder why those 5 who had oil wouldn't share with those who ran out? That sounds selfish. But the point is this: some things, like faith, must be your own. Something you must do for yourself. No one can, or should do it for you.

William Gibson in his novel, [A Mass for the Dead](#), wrote about the day he was tidying up his parents' house after they had passed away. He picked up his mother's gold-rimmed spectacles to read her favorite Bible. He sat down in her comfy chair by the window, placed her tiny spectacles on his nose and tried to see what she saw in the scripture. He reached out for some slender thread of her faith, once so vibrant in her. It

didn't work. Perhaps he was too preoccupied with the empty household, or with his grief, or with trying to figure it all out, but he could not recapture anything. He said he felt as silly as he must have looked wearing her little glasses. His mother's faith could not be borrowed. Another's faith can be an impetus for your own. We can admire and envy it, but we can never borrow or inherit it. It must be our own. Each of us must walk that lonesome, individual valley by ourselves. It is not faith until is your faith.¹

Now let's prepare to fill our lamps with oil that takes the form of bread and wine.



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