

"IT'S TOO LATE"
November 25, 1990

Matthew 25: 1-13

Mark Dunn

Weddings in the church and community where I grew up took on a spirit of excitement that can only be compared with the opening of presents on Christmas morning. Despite the relatively short wedding ceremony and reception in the church fellowship hall, there was the planning and the mapping out of strategies.

The goal of the bride and groom was to greet all the guests and then make their get-a-way. A goal of the groom was to prevent his new car from being destroyed. That is to prevent sardines from being placed on the engine and shoe polish on the shiny exterior. However, the goal of the bride and groom's so-called friends, who have now become enemies, is to play as many tricks on them as possible. It has been 25 years but the story continues to be told of one couple who thought they had gotten away unscathed when they slipped out of town. But they were "too late." Their friends had made plans to have the county sheriff waiting for them. The sheriff transported the groom to jail along with the bride with all their friends following in a motorcade. The sheriff actually locked the groom in jail.

The parable which Jesus tells reflects that same revelry surrounding a wedding celebration 2000 years ago.

I. THE MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE

In those days the high point was the approach of the groom. His goal was to sneak up on the wedding party and try to catch them unaware. So the bridegroom would usually arrive unexpectedly, in the middle of the night. For the young girls, it would be a real tragedy to be caught napping. This was quite possibly the only party they would go to all year. But after the groom went in, the doors were closed and the party started. Those still outside became victims of a practical joke and just had to suffer exclusion. They missed the affection and joy of the celebration. In this day and time, this seems harsh, while it was funny to them, and it became an event which was talked about for years.

A. The message Jesus was attempting to convey in this parable is that the joy of God's Kingdom can break into our space at any moment. If we are unprepared, it could be too late and we are left outside of God's Kingdom of love and joy.

Theologians continue to discuss and write about the Kingdom of God. All kinds of questions are considered. Is the Kingdom of God a present reality? Or is the Kingdom of God something which has yet to come, which is implied in the Lord's Prayer? I believe that "it is all of the above." At death we enter the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, whenever the principles of love are being manifested within our beings and in lives, God's Kingdom is present. Thus the Kingdom of God could manifest itself and we might fail to experience it. The materialism of the present epoch contributes to this blindness. We could observe a good Samaritan visiting the homebound, or feeding the hungry and never realize the Kingdom of God is being manifested. We do not realize until it is too late and that precious moment slips through our hands.

B. Soap operas capture this scenario of being too late very vividly. An attractive woman married to an older man leaves him for the quarterback of an NFL football team. The older man has a tragic accident. The young woman rushes to the hospital to tell him one more time that she loves him still. Rushing down the hall of the hospital with tears streaming down her face, she calls to a nurse that she wants to see her husband. But the nurse, having just pulled the sheet over the patient's head, turns to the desperate young woman and says, "I'm sorry, but it's too late."

C. What could be more tragic than those words, "it's too late." Too late to be reconciled to a spouse or a parent. Too late to just observe the movement of God's hand in human relationships when transformation is experienced. Too late to develop a mature relationship with God.

During my years growing up in an evangelical tradition, I heard a lot of sermons proclaiming the urgency of making a decision about one's relationship to God's Kingdom. There were the two, one week long revivals which were held in the spring and the fall. One of those evening revival meetings was usually devoted to converting the youth, and all the parents made an effort to have their teenager present. I went, "reluctantly." An evangelist was secured to preach for 45 minutes each evening. With his coat removed and the sweat flowing down his face, this person preached like he had been to hell that morning and lived to tell about it. Jonathan Edwards sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," captures the spirit of those meetings:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider...It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. (P. 63 & 66)

For a fourteen year old boy whose hormones had begun to stir and didn't quite understand it, I experienced sheer terror. Today I understand that kind of message as poor theology, but at that time, I knew God was going to get me. Fear was used to manipulate a person into making a decision about his relationship with God.

II. PROCRASTINATION AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Yet, there is a bit of truth in the spirit of revivalism. There is an urgency when it comes to making Kingdom decisions about our lives. Procrastination about those decisions can mean we may wait until it is too late. By not making a decision, we make our decision. Just observe some examples from life.

A. A career man or woman drag themselves to the same boring job for 20 or 30 years. They thought about making a change or returning to college but just kept putting it off until a more convenient time. God had written His will on their hearts in the form of a special talent and they were afraid to resurrect it. Now they are past middle age. How can a person make a career change in their 50's and 60's. It is usually too late. The door of God's Kingdom of joy in the use of that talent is closed. It's too late.

B. A marriage and a family slowly but surely become dysfunctional over the passing of years. Conflicts result in emotional triangles between the family

members instead of growth in their relationships. The husband and wife considered making an appointment with a therapist, but that could wait till a time when they weren't so busy. Maybe after soccer season is over and then the football season and then Christmas? But the years of emotional battles drag on until it is too late for any kind of healing and reconciliation. The possibility of a Kingdom of God's love existing within the family context is lost.

C. The last example of the dangers of procrastination concerns the nurturing of the spiritual life. Spiritual depth is not something we can borrow from others like the girls in Jesus' story tried to borrow lamp oil. It has to be developed. Worship and spiritual retreats facilitate this spiritual process. However, even this may not be enough sacred time and we are left needing some other method to nourish our souls. But, we don't have the time for anything else, so we just try to forget about that nagging deep within.

One method of spiritual nurturing is spiritual journaling. This is writing and reflecting on the experiences of our lives in a theological mode. Ira Progoff in his book on journaling said "Under the pressure of events, our lives become hard packed like soil that has not been tilled for years." This leaves "no room for the fresh air of consciousness to enter, nor for anything new to grow." For some three years I have been desiring to begin spiritual journaling again. A few days ago I tried, but my soul was like the red clay of Georgia. I hope I haven't waited until it's too late. I can't borrow spiritual depth from you or anyone else.

I have to confess to you that procrastination is one of my sins. I will wait until the last minute to get ready for a party or prepare a sermon. There is nothing like preparing a sermon at 1 or 2 a.m. on Sunday morning. The tension is almost unbearable. I could be a charter member of the National Procrastination Club of America. This is a real club who once announced: "Last week was National Procrastination Week."

III. ON BEING READY AND WATCHFUL

This is a parable that calls us to be watchful and to be prepared if we are to enter the joy of God's Kingdom. We always think we have more time to respond to the call of God. However, this is not a parable about God's grace. It is about being prepared to experience the Kingdom of God in order to enter that realm of the spirit. As all of us know, making preparation for something so important takes time.

A. A father and a mother came to the pastor and remarked how happy they were with their daughter's development as she was graduating from high school. This didn't just occur over night or start when she was 18. It started when they took her to Sunday School at 3 and when she signed up for choir at 10 or 12. It continued in P.F. from 6th grade through the 12th grade. Spiritual and emotional wholeness develops when we love them regardless of their moodiness at 14. To build the Kingdom of God's love and joy takes careful preparation.

B. It is the joyous person who is already prepared for Christmas and has completed all his Christmas shopping. I will not ask for a show of hands as to those who haven't completed this task. Time is marching on; there are only 29 shopping days until Christmas. We know when Christmas will come but we don't

know when God will attempt to break into our lives. Watch therefore! No one knows the day nor the hour when the Lord will require our services. Will we be prepared to do His will and follow the call of the Kingdom?

CONCLUSION

I have to be honest with you. This very simple message of this parable scares me like the man who had the dream. Because of my own procrastination, sometimes I wish it hadn't been included in scripture. I wouldn't have to grapple with its message. I could let my faith just be something I feel rather than something I know and understand. As a member of a mainline Protestant tradition, we pride ourselves in being respectful of other belief systems. But in doing so we fail to develop our own. We can't wait until 1991 to begin studying and sorting out our personal beliefs.

The story is told of a man who died and went to St. Peter. St. Peter asked him about his faith and his relationship with God. The man replied: "Well, my father was a Methodist circuit rider." St. Peter replied, "No, what about your relationship?" "Well, my wife prayed daily for us." "No, your relationship," replied St. Peter. We can't procrastinate about developing the Kingdom within and at the last minute borrow from the family. We must build our own before it is too late. Then we may enter the joy of God's wedding celebration. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Our Father in Heaven, we come to You seeking to put our priorities of our lives in order and to submit our minds and our memories to You. Help us in this hour to remember all that is pleasing to You and to forget what is better forgotten.

We remember the great dreams of youth when we were unselfish and chivalrous and wanted to go forth and do great things for the world. May these memories summon us again to the heroic and brave and true.

We remember when love was young and hope was living and faith was strong. We remember the great and hallowed experiences of earlier days which enriched our lives.

We remember the sick times and how this led us to become closer to You. We remember our unanswered prayers and know that if every one had been answered as we wanted, we would have become spoiled children. We remember our failures which were steppingstones, by Your grace, to real achievement.

We remember those precious persons in our past who nurtured our spirits. We remember the young men and women in Saudi Arabia who are even now sacrificing for us since they are separated from their families. We pray for them and for peace.

As we remember, we pray that You will lift us above the petty problems of everyday--the office rivalries, the dirty dishes, the nasty little jobs--and help us to see behind it, the growth in personal relations that can supercede conflicts, that it is fellowship around the table that makes the dishes dirty, and that we develop discipline from doing nasty little jobs.

Lift us above today with its desperate pressures to do this, to be that, and to go there. Help us to remember that we are meant for more than today and Your plans for our future are written on our hearts that we might be with You for all eternity. We pray this prayer in Christ's name. Amen.