

The Daily Vigil

A Sermon by

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The fall of 1971 I entered the Eighth Grade, and we called it Junior High back then, not Middle School. Eighth Grade is a year in which the history class is U.S. History. I loved all history classes and especially U.S. History. In those days at Longfellow Junior High School, down in the fair city of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, there was one U.S. History teacher to fear and her name was Miss Flint. She was a stocky, athletic, woman, who proudly served in the Navy during World War Two, boasted of her skills in Karate, and didn't take any guff from adolescent kids. She was equally demanding in the classroom. To my terror, when the class schedule came out, I drew U.S. History in Miss Flint's class. Interestingly, however, my love for history helped me a lot and it didn't take Miss Flint long to encourage me. Simultaneously, my thirteen year old self brought my best behavior to her class out of fear of potentially being used as a Karate example (the school rumors had it that she roughed up a gang of tough kids years before - I'm sure they were true).

Truth be told, I quickly learned to love Miss Flint, the way she taught history, and would've gladly followed her anywhere. I dutifully completed my assignments and passed the tests and quizzes. One of our weekly assignments was to do a detailed outline of the assigned chapter in the text book. I always got them done, though sometimes cut too close to the deadline. I think a lot of kids were blowing them off. Because of that, one day Miss Flint called in the loan. In other words, word quickly spread around the school that she asked the students from her first period class to turn in their outline assignments early. I didn't have my assignment completed. I was devastated. I was less concerned about the impact of the assignment than letting Miss Flint down. The lesson learned was priceless. Relationships, especially great relationships, need attention and nurturing, because one never knows the day or the hour when the relationship is going to require a meaningful accounting.

Today's parable of the ten bridesmaids really boils down to the importance of relationships. It describes well the responsibility each Christian has in our relationship with God. It begins with the words, "... the kingdom of heaven will be like ..." and at first glance one might think that it speaks exclusively to the return of Christ. In truth, the return of Christ is the backdrop. It is a given. It's going to happen. Until then, Jesus asks Christians to be prepared and align our relationships

rightly, and take responsibility for our actions in order to be ready for the arrival of the bridegroom, or the coming of Christ.

The parable in Matthew describes ten bridesmaids, five wise ones and five foolish ones. The parable would have invoked familiar images for the audience of that day in age. A couple were typically married in the home of the bride's father. Once the ceremony was complete, the wedding party entourage would travel from the bride's home to the groom's residence where the rest of the wedding party and guests patiently waited, anticipating the coming reception. None would know the exact time of the arrival and it might happen at night, especially if the groom's home was in another town.

The parable of the Ten Bridesmaids represents a warning to the early church in the formative days of Matthew's Gospel. The warning to the early Christians, who all expected the return of Christ at any moment in their lifetimes, was to nurture their relationship with Jesus and to not take it for granted. This parable is surrounded by other parables with a similar message, so the topic was a really big deal. Beyond merely accepting Christ into their lives, the believer has a responsibility to be prepared, to do their part, and mature in the relationship with Christ. The five wise bridesmaids represented Christians who take their relationship with Jesus seriously enough to be known to the Kingdom of God and be let into the house. The five foolish bridesmaids let their school assignment slip and when the time finally comes for them to act, it is too late. When they plead to be let in the door, they are told by the groom, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you."

This parable, for the modern ear, can represent the many times in our lives the bridegroom, the Christ, intersects with our lives and we are either ready, or not. We either have our assignments completed, or we disappoint our teacher.

Like most people, I like to tell of the times when I've had the courage to do what is right for the Kingdom of God. Yet, there are many personal regrets in which Christ came to a situation and called for me to act and, not being prepared, I let him down, the door closed, and in those moments, I felt kind of alone. I remember one time, way back in the summer of 1980 when I was an ROTC cadet in training at Fort Riley, Kansas. I was sitting on my bunk and some African American cadets were close by conversing about being marginalized and left out of opportunities throughout our training unit. One of those cadets looked at me and said, "Hey, Koch, you know what we're talking about. You see it too, don't you?" What a fantastic moment of trust. I was pulled into their circle, because they experienced me, as I had experienced them, as a valuable part of the team. Yet I was naive and uncomfortable with the conversation, so I demurred and let a God moment slip right on by. It was then that the bridegroom showed up and I was out of oil. "I tell you the truth, I don't know you."

The reason God doesn't know me when I commit a regretful moment is because that's not the person God created me to be. In the movie "The Shawshank Redemption" actor Morgan Freeman plays the part of a man named Red who was in prison for having murdered a man when we was pretty young. Red goes before three parole boards throughout the movie. The first two, 1947 and 1957, Red tells the parole board what he thinks they want to hear and he is denied both times. Then, in 1967, he finally gives this heartfelt answer: "There's not a day goes by I don't feel regret. Not because I'm in here, or because you think I should. I look back on the way I was then: a young, stupid kid who committed that terrible crime. I want to talk to him. I want to try and talk some sense to him, tell him the way things are. But I can't. That kid's long gone and this old man is all that's left. I got to live with that."

I like to think of those lines Red spoke when I reflect on regretful moments in my life. Those are the moments in which we're coming to our true created selves. Those are moments to experience the grace of God working, shaping, and recreating a new and clean spirit within. I have discovered in my life that God doesn't give up on me. The bridegroom keeps coming back in new situations and more and more I find myself better prepared with enough oil to meet the encounter Christ has designed for me to address. There are still spiritual considerations to consider and the parable addresses them all.

One of the considerations Jesus really tries to drive home is for us to pay attention. Our world confronts us with so many distractions we keep chasing after frivolous things that keep us from making sure we have enough oil for our lamps. Many days when I drive home from work on JBER there's a really long line of vehicles on the way to the Glenn Highway exit. Invariably, there are always people trying to pull out into that long line from a side street, or a parking lot and they have a potentially very long wait before a break in traffic comes along. I try to do my part and help. As I approach someone waiting to turn into the traffic pattern I slow down, flash my headlights a couple of times to signal that I'm letting them in. I can't completely stop. There are a ton of vehicles behind me. Most people are grateful and give me a big happy wave when they're let in. Sometimes I flash my lights and get closer, closer, closer (no response) ... then I wave them to turn and closer, closer, closer (Still no response) ... then flash my lights again and closer, closer, too late. As I drive by the person is usually just looking up from presumably texting on their cell phone. Opportunity missed by distraction; attention diverted and chances squandered.

Another consideration brought up in the parable, and people in bible studies love to ask about this, how come the five wise maidens couldn't share their oil? How much oil does one need to go into the party? My first snarky answer is usually, "Hey, this is a parable. Don't try to solve their problems." Again, think relationships. The oil, or amount of oil, represents how much forethought and effort one has committed to the relationship. I cannot share my personal relationship alongside God with other

people. Nor can I give another person my spiritual experiences, the things I've worked on, the depth and understanding I have. It's like when I'm dressed in my gym clothes and another soldier passes me in the hallway and says, "Hey chaplain Koch, do some push-ups for me." Now, I can display my personal spiritual relationship as an example. Certainly, the five foolish maidens had the opportunity to see the example of wisdom displayed by their sisters and maybe could have gained from watching and learning before it was too late. Nevertheless, it seems what Jesus is trying to impart embodies the very real and thoughtful part we each have to play in order to experience the fullness of relationship with him. We can't borrow that from anyone.

Fortunately, since the end times haven't happened yet, the bridegroom keeps coming back to see if the Divinely created person is ready to respond. That's good for me, because I need that kind of grace. I think of Jonah who tried to escape the Kingdom of God and then got swallowed by a whale. He eventually figured it out and went on to fulfill God's mission. Look at Moses. He murdered a man when he was young. A murderer was not who God created him to be, though eventually he filled his spiritual lamp with oil and became the light bearing guide that led the people of Israel out of slavery. The Apostle Paul once persecuted Christians unto death until he responded to the bridegroom's call. In fact, all of the Apostles at one time or another acted the part of the unprepared believer, then were given the grace to give it a better try.

The parable told for Matthew's day and works in our day as well. Jesus reminds us to take his friendship seriously and to put time and energy into our part of building it up in order to be ready when he calls us to respond to the needs of the kingdom of heaven. Those needs are happening right here in this room today and most certainly, in the ripened fields outside our doors. When our boys were little I used to pick them up from a day care held in a local church a couple of blocks away from where I worked. I remember every time I walked out of that church I was confronted with an attractive wooden sign with the words, "Welcome to your mission field" emblazoned in rich black letters. And I often thought, "Am I ready for the mission God has in store for me out here?" Are we ready for the mission God designs for us? Only if we prepare ourselves through prayer, study, reflection, practice, and commit to the effort and work of our part in building relationship with Christ, may we have enough oil for today. Keep talking to God. Continue studying the word. Think every moment of how God works in our lives. Practice with small acts of intentional kindness to everyone we meet. And walk the streets of life remembering that our friend Jesus is walking with us, and talking with us every step of the way. We'll all discover then, the oil for our lamps can never run out. Amen.