

COME TO A PERSONAL FAITH

A sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, May 15, 2016

based on Matthew 25 1:1–13

What is the most joyous occasion you can think of? The Cleveland Cavaliers winning a national championship, or the Cleveland Indians winning the World Series, or the Cleveland Browns winning anything? If you were to ask someone in first century Palestine, “What is the most joyous occasion you can think of?” they would almost certainly answer: a wedding, or a wedding feast. So Jesus would use the image of a wedding or wedding feast as a symbol of the joy of God’s kingdom.

You have likely been to a wedding reception where you are waiting for the bride and groom to arrive. They are getting pictures taken, so they may be a while. But when they finally do arrive, there is great applause and rejoicing.

It is a similar scenario in the parable, except in an ancient wedding, the wedding and the feast happened at the same place, generally in a home, and people waited expectantly for the bride and groom to arrive for the whole event. The parable mentions only that people were waiting for the bridegroom, but the hearer would understand that the bride would be with him. *[Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Matthew 25:1]* The focus is on the bridegroom, because in the parable the bridegroom is a symbol for Christ, who would enter into our lives.

But there is a delay. *[The bridegroom was delayed . . . Matthew 25:5a]* No explanation is given as to why the bridegroom is delayed. Perhaps he is haggling with the bride’s parents over the size of the dowry. Such speculation is irrelevant of course. The image in the parable is simply one of unexplained delay.

There may be times in our lives when we are hoping for God to come to us and be at work in some way, but help does not come, at least not for some time. The apparent absence of God is beyond our understanding. What Jesus urges his followers to do in such circumstances is to stay alert, to stay receptive, because God is at work, and Christ will come to us. This kind of spiritual alertness, or receptivity—or the lack of it—is illustrated in the parable in the role of the bridesmaids.

The setting of the parable is in the evening, so the bridesmaids have lamps in order to beautifully light the way for the entrance of the bride and bridegroom. But because the entrance is seriously delayed, they doze off. *[The bridesmaids became drowsy and fell asleep. Matthew 25:5b]* Perhaps we spiritually doze off sometimes in life. But God is gracious; God sends wake-up calls. This happens in the parable, as somebody shouts out, “The bridegroom is coming!” *[At midnight there was a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Matthew 25:6]* The bridesmaids grab their lamps and hustle to get into position for their reception. *[The bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. Matthew 25:7]*

The lamps have been burning. In the first century, you couldn’t just grab a butane lighter or even a match to quickly light a lamp; the practice was to keep a fire going once you got it lit. But the lamps burned oil, and the oil was starting to run out. Some of the

bridesmaids, the “wise” ones, have brought an extra flask of oil, [*the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. Matthew 25:4*] and they now pour the oil into the lamps to keep them burning. The other five bridesmaids, the “foolish” ones, have no oil, and they say to the wise bridesmaids, “Give us some of your oil.” [*The foolish ones said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” Matthew 27:8*] But the wise bridesmaids refuse, saying, “Sorry, we are using that oil. You need to go and get your own oil.” [*The wise replied, “No! There is not enough for you and for us. Go out and buy some for yourselves.” Matthew 27:9*]

Obviously this is not a parable about sharing. It might have been easier, actually, if the parable had been in a modern setting, and the bridesmaids had had battery operated lamps, and the wise bridesmaids had each brought a spare battery, and the foolish ones said, “Give us your spare battery, and the wise ones said, “Sorry, we put the battery in our own lamp.” You cannot share a battery between two separate lamps.

The parable, in fact, is about something that cannot be given from one person to another. In the parable, the oil in the lamps symbolizes our personal readiness to receive Christ, or more specifically, the oil symbolizes our faith. The fact that one group of bridesmaids could not give oil to the others illustrates the fact that it is not possible for one person to give faith to another.

There are a lot of things that we cannot simply give to another person. If you have a particular talent—if you play an instrument or a sport—you cannot just give that talent to someone else. You could help someone else learn the instrument or the sport, but they must develop their own talent. Likewise we cannot give spiritual qualities. You cannot give courage to somebody, or hope, or goodness. Each person must develop those qualities from within.

Likewise we cannot give somebody else our faith. As a church, a key part of our mission is to help people develop faith, but each of us finally must come to our own personal faith.

This theme connects very much with Confirmation Sunday, since Confirmation is focused on developing one’s own personal faith. [*8:30/9:30—This morning at the 10:30 hour we will be celebrating Confirmation for eight seventh graders in our church; you will find their names in the bulletin. They have completed a series of classes, field trips and service projects, they have had many faith conversations with parents and mentors, and this morning they will be standing up and proclaiming their own personal faith.*] The Confirmation journey also illustrates a key aspect of how we come to faith—that faith generally does not just instantaneously appear, but comes through a process of growing in faith. This is why Confirmation stretches through multiple experiences across several months, and we believe that Confirmation Day is not the end of the process but is an important point in an ongoing journey of growing in faith.

Christian educators who have studied faith development have noted that we can actually identify stages of faith through which people typically progress as they are growing in faith. There are at least three such stages. The first is sometimes called copied or mirrored faith, that is, faith that is a reflection of the faith that is in the people around

us. This is what we commonly see in children, who replicate the beliefs and practices of the whole faith community. This is an important level of faith, as children are gaining foundational understandings and values. Some people never really leave this level of faith; but another stage often follows, the stage of questioning faith. This commonly appears in adolescence or young adulthood; it is a time of questioning one's beliefs and wrestling with faith. People in this faith stage may not be sure what they believe, or if they believe at all. The great novelist Robert Louis Stevenson, when he was in college, announced to his staunch Presbyterian parents that he had become atheist. But later in life he came to what he called a "cast iron faith"; as he wrote, "There is a God who is manifest for those who care to look for Him." Stevenson's story illustrates how a time of questioning and doubting and wrestling with beliefs can actually be an important stage in moving toward the mature third stage of faith.

The third stage of faith is sometimes called "owned faith" or "personal faith"—that is faith that is our own, faith in which we have our own personal relationship with God. It is faith in which we have our own lamp, full of oil.

Our Methodist founder John Wesley went through these stages of faith. He grew up in the Church of England, and when he was young he reflected the basic ideas and values of the church of his day. But then as a young man he had a time of serious questioning. It happened as he encountered some major struggles and failures, and he was completely unsure in his faith. But then one night he was at a Bible study and prayer meeting at Aldersgate Street in London, when he said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed; I felt that Christ had died for me, and had saved me from the law of sin and death." He had come to personal faith—his own personal experience of Christ, his own trust in Christ.

You may gather that these stages are not necessarily defined periods in life, but they can overlap and may represent various periods in life. The important thing is to keep growing in faith. In the parable, the bridesmaids with the oil are staying receptive even as they may have some real questions about where the bridegroom is. So Jesus encourages us to keep our lamp burning—to look for God and be ready for how God would inspire us and would be at work in our lives.

At the end of the parable, the bridesmaids with lamps burning enter the joy of the wedding feast. *[Those who were ready went with the bridegroom into the wedding feast. Matthew 25:10]* There is real and lasting joy to be found as we enter into fellowship with Christ. It is joy that deepens as we grow in Christ, and it is joy that will continue forever in the feast of God's eternal Kingdom.