

Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

“I can’t believe she’s gone!”

“It seems so unfair...I just saw her yesterday. She was such a lovely woman.”

“She will certainly be missed. I just wish that I had a chance to say goodbye”

So goes the conversations I often hear at the funerals of people who die unexpectedly (like the one I did on Monday) ... and so often there’s shock and disbelief – confusion and a sense of bewilderment in how death can swallow up anyone *at anytime* (and how – each of the premature deaths we often find ourselves confronting – *or the death of someone who acted as our rock in this world* - can serve as a very frightening reminder – that one day, we too, will face the same fate (as well)... and we are wise – our Lord often repeated - to be ready...

Years ago, there was a Presbyterian evangelist, named James Kennedy, who developed a style of preaching that confronted his audience with challenging questions – meant to get people to think about the deeper meaning of this life (but more importantly, about the Life to Come) – in hopes that by examining their *present* they might have peace for the *future*... their Eternal future...

And in one of his sermons he asks the following questions (that I want you to think about this morning)... he asks, *“If you were to die in the next hour what business would you leave undone?... What words do you wish you had spoken?... What regrets would go with you into death?... and then pointing to his watch he would say, “what is left to finish in the next 60 minutes?”...*

I would imagine that most of us who are here today believe that taking care of unfinished business is important... in fact, most of us don’t like to walk away from jobs – or projects – or special duties... and we especially don’t like to walk away when something is unresolved within us... and to die that way (I would imagine brings with it its own personal hell)...

But that’s why I think there is great blessing in thinking about Pastor Kennedy’s questions – because when we seek to resolve the pains that we collect along the pathways of life – and when we reconcile ourselves with God - (my guess is that we also prepare our hearts to meet Jesus)... that we ready ourselves for the inevitable... and we can have peace within ourselves – when the Bridegroom calls out our name...

In fact, this week as I was preparing my message I thought about something a bereavement minister, named Patti Normile, wrote about an experience that she had with a woman who desperately wanted to reconcile with her own daughter (so that she, too, could die in peace)... listen to what she witnessed along the way:

She writes, “The human spirit is a powerful thing... I have watched dying people hang on for days and weeks in order to finish something... I’ll never forget sitting at a bedside with a church member for weeks as she waited for her estranged daughter to come... Every day she asked for her, and every day the daughter didn’t show up... Finally the other daughter drove to another state to get her sister, and when she walked in, she and her mother finally reconciled... They held each other and cried, forgave all past grievances, and expressed their love – right there in that room... it was one of the most beautiful things I have ever witnessed” ...

And then Patti Normile continued, *“The mother seemed to say with her big smiling eyes, “now I am ready to meet my maker”, – she then closed her eyes – and died peacefully- a few moments later.” ...*

I don’t know about you – but I would agree that being prepared to die (is the greatest blessing one can have)... and to die in peace – knowing that you resolved what you could, said what needed to be said, and let love have the final word – is certainly a gift from God (and one that I believe that the Lord wants for all of us)... for us to die in peace (and to be ready – when that day arrives)...

In fact, in our Gospel reading this morning Jesus tells a parable that scholars have often referred to as the, “Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids’... and from first glance it can raise some questions... one that I have always wondered about myself, is why, when the oil was running low didn’t the 5 wise bridesmaids share their portion *with the 5 foolish bridesmaids?*... (I mean, isn’t sharing is a Christian virtue?) ...

Someone else once wondered what the oil in the parable represents?... is it faith?... is it good deeds?... or is it something else?... or perhaps it doesn’t mean anything?

And still others have struggled to find the good news in this story (since the 5 who fail to have enough oil - and who get cast into the outer darkness – are left to hear the ultimate rejection from the Bride groom, “Go away from me – I do not know you”)... indicating that their peace will never come (especially if the Bride Groom in this story is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ)...

But in reflection through the years – and in reflection this week as I was preparing my message – I’ve come to the conclusion that this isn’t a lesson about sharing... (for all we know, all they brought was enough for themselves)...

nor is it some cryptic parable meant to be ‘figured out’ or ‘deciphered’...

Instead, I’ve come to believe that it’s a parable meant to remind the reader that we, too, should be ready (for the Bridegroom to call out our name)... it’s a reminder that we never know the day or the hour of our last breath... we never know the moment when this world and all of its horror will suddenly be interrupted by the Kingdom of Heaven... and the point of the parable – is the same message that I have for you today – to be ready...

And isn’t that what the foolish bridesmaids (who failed to have their oil ready) had forgotten?... they foolishly believed that they had all the time in the world to get ready... just as some of us may believe that we have all the time in the world to make amends, or pursue righteousness, or reconcile bitter divisions, or even walk in obedience... but what Jesus, our teacher, is reminding us in the telling of this parable (and needs to be heard in these dark days) – is that the foolish ones are wrong... You can’t wait ‘til it’s too late...

And yet, the good news in this parable is that we can take a different path... because, as we see in this parable, it’s the wise ones (who we are invited to follow) who live each day as if it were their last one on earth... and it’s the wise ones who readied themselves to meet the Bridegroom (when their hour had come)...

And for some that is the hardest part of this parable to digest – that a time will come for all of us when we too will have to draw on the oil we have, right there on our body, in our flask.... And it’s not going to come from our good intentions, or our ‘long range’ plans, or even what we hope to do at ‘some point’...

It’s going to come from what spiritually fuels you right now... it’s going to come from where you see God today?... but the question that this parable demands us to answer - is: are you ready?... **(are you ready to meet the bridegroom?)...**

Let close with something for you to think about... it’s a story about the Titanic... about a very wealthy woman who was a passenger on the ship... and when she first arrived she brought with her many things... but what made her the most proud were her many fine jewels...

And when she received word that the ship was going under – she was about to step into the raft to be saved but asked if she could run back to her room for just a second... and so they gave her 3 minutes or they'd leave without her...

And guess what it was she grabbed when she went back to the room? – she grabbed 3 tangerines and 1 banana... she then quickly ran back to the boat and found safety...

So what does that story have to do with anything?...

well I think it puts into perspective a very serious truth – that when life seems wonderful, (and death seems so far off) it's easy to get comfortable and lose perspective of what truly is a treasure... But when death becomes a reality (and let me add that one day it will for all of us) everything will change within you... and what seemed so important yesterday (will mean nothing to you in the end – in comparison to the love of Jesus – that we are promised will sustain us in the world to Come)...

and Jesus tells us that we are wise to care... wise to get ready... and when we are all invited by the Bridegroom we will celebrate the wedding feast that has no end... something that's certainly worth getting ready for (because once you arrive – you will never want to leave)...

It's my prayer today that all of us might keep the light of Christ burning bright for all to see... that we may stay close and steady on the path that leads to God... and that in the end – peace, love, and truth may be found in all of our hearts...

In Jesus' name we pray...

Amen!

