



March 24, 2019

## Are You Ready for the Banquet? Pastor Shelley Cunningham

1 [Jesus said,] "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this:

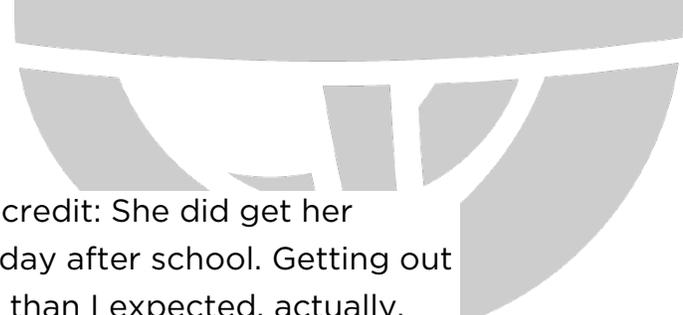
"Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 9 But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' 12 But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'

13 "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Lifehack experts agree: One of the best ways to reduce morning stress is to get your stuff ready the night before. Choose your outfit. Make your lunch. Put coffee grounds and water in the machine. Pack your briefcase or backpack. Find your car keys.

That strategy may not work for you, but it definitely works for me. There are just too many things to take care of in the morning. And I leave for work super early. My brain isn't necessarily focusing on the details.

I've tried to pass this habit on to my children. Let's just say that effort has had mixed success. Case in point: Last Thursday Mia was catching an 8am flight out of the Minneapolis airport. *Make sure absolutely everything is in your suitcase and backpack before you go to sleep,* I told her, oh, once or



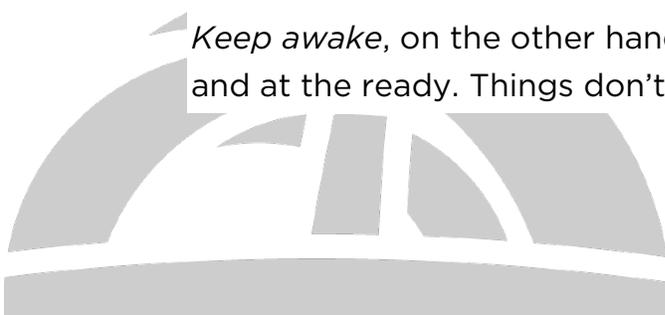
twice or maybe a dozen times. And I'll give her credit: She did get her laundry done and her clothes together Wednesday after school. Getting out the door at 5:30 Thursday morning went better than I expected, actually. But just as we were exiting off Highway 494, she realized that she'd left her laptop charging on her desk. The laptop she was going to use to write her English paper while sitting in Chicago for a 3-hour layover. Did I feel bad for her? Absolutely. Did I pretty much bite my tongue until it bled? Absolutely. It's a good thing we were only about 3 minutes from the airport. I'm not sure my self-control could have lasted much longer.

So let me ask: Do you live so that all of your details are carefully tended to in advance, or are you usually pulling them together at the last minute? (For those of you keeping score: Yes, I'm appreciating the irony that my last sermon was about not passing judgment on other people, and also that I finished writing this sermon at 8:12 this morning.)

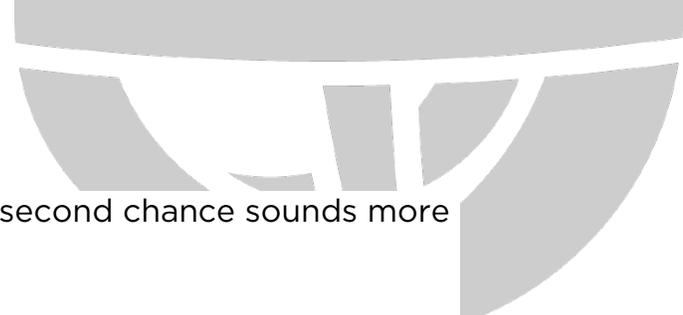
At first glance this seems like the point of the story from Matthew 25. The wise bridesmaids had plenty of oil for their lamps. When the bridegroom showed up in the middle of the night, they weren't caught off guard. The foolish bridesmaids, on the other hand, were unprepared. Their lamps were running low and they had to rush to make accommodations. If only they had planned ahead - they would have made their mothers so happy.

Except notice that the word from Jesus at the end of this passage isn't *be prepared*. It's *keep awake*. *Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour*. That may sound like semantics, but there is a difference.

*Be prepared* fits the modern-day mentality that we're in control of our lives. Just do the right thing. Just plan ahead. Just pack carefully. It implies that our actions have a direct correlation with our success. And while that may certainly often be true, it's not always. And this kind of mindset can be dangerous - because it also implies that people who don't succeed just might deserve their fate. Focus too much on being prepared and you start to hear this as a parable of judgment. It's too bad that the foolish bridesmaids missed the party, but really, it was their own fault.



*Keep awake*, on the other hand, sounds more like pay attention. Be vigilant and at the ready. Things don't always go according to plan, and you don't



want to miss an opportunity. Getting to have a second chance sounds more like a parable of grace.

But wait, you may be saying, both the wise and foolish bridesmaids fell asleep. So simply staying awake wasn't what differentiated them. What made the first set wise was that they brought extra oil, just in case.

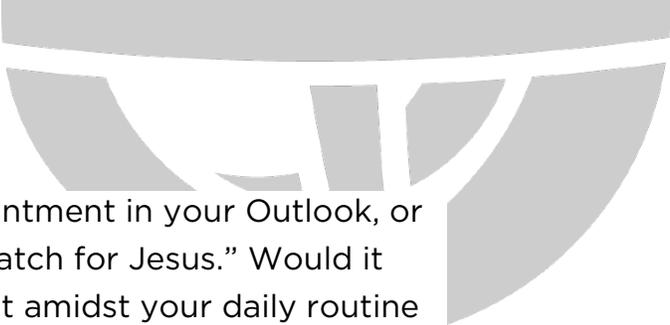
True. Clearly there is something important about being ready. But the point of this parable – the point of this whole section in Matthew's gospel – is to instill a sense of urgency. Your choices matter. Your faithfulness matters.

Remember, Matthew was writing to a community that was struggling to stay awake, so to speak. It had been almost a generation since the temple in Jerusalem – the very physical manifestation of God's presence, was destroyed. And it had been nearly half a century since the death and resurrection of Jesus. The promise that Christ was coming soon rang hollow in their ears. And clinging to those promises, and the belief that Jesus was the Messiah, had put most early Christians on the fringe of Jewish society. They'd either been expelled from or left their community of faith. Whether it was despair or complacency or a mixture of both, there was a growing sense that Jesus was gone for good. In Matthew's eyes, people were acting more like the disciples asleep in the garden than alert bridesmaids waiting for the groom to arrive.

How much more so does this describe us some 2000 years later? Sure, there have been people of every generation who have believed that they would be the last. That Christ's return was imminent. They read the signs and decode the events they see around them and are convinced that everything points to a forecastable day or hour.

But for many of us, especially as we've watched such predictions come and go, that mentality is not very compelling, at least not on a day-to-day basis. We have life to attend to – kids to raise and jobs to do and retirement to enjoy. We plan and prepare for the day ahead, fully trusting that barring a tragic accident we'll have another day to take care of tomorrow. You can't just pencil "Jesus coming" into your calendar and let that all go.





Or can you? What if you made a recurring appointment in your Outlook, or stuck a post-it on your dashboard, that said, “Watch for Jesus.” Would it make you more aware? Would it remind you that amidst your daily routine there’s something bigger?

Living with a sense of expectation that Christ is near changes things. It makes every decision more fraught with importance, for one. Am I living like Christ? Am I daring to give of myself freely? Am I paying attention to the needs of my neighbor?

When we are compelled by those beliefs, we start to wake up to God’s kingdom in a new way. And then, like the wise bridesmaids, we are more prepared and equipped to actually meet the bridegroom, Jesus.

Pastor Mark Dumke puts it like this: “Perhaps the extra oil those wise bridesmaids bring is like the practices of discipleship. We may wonder, ‘why do these things, when you don’t have to – we’re saved by grace, not by what we do.’ But those practices help us avoid distraction and keep our focus on Jesus. We are distracted by possessions – the practice of radical generosity helps with that. We are distracted by busyness – the practice of Sabbath-keeping helps with that. We are distracted by guilt – remembering our baptism and receiving the sacrament helps with that. Some may say these practices are foolish, but they clear away the distractions that prevent us from seeing Christ among us.”

Friends, being ready for the banquet doesn’t simply mean making sure you are ready. It means taking care of those around you to make sure they are ready too. It starts by waking up to the world God so loves. Know what you might be looking for. Be open to seeing Jesus in unexpected ways

And then, don’t just watch for Jesus. Expect to encounter him. Because we may not know the day or the hour. But we do know that Christ is with us always, even to the end of the age. Amen.

