

*People Get Ready*

Matthew 25:1-13

Whitefish UMC

November 9, 2008

- † The crowd went wild. Already excited by the music of Bono and his band, U2, all of a sudden the iconic Bruce Springsteen walked onstage. Together they sang the old gospel blues song, “People Get Ready,” written by Curtis Mayfield.
- † To get a sense of what they saw, Google “Bono and Springsteen People Get Ready.”
- † These are the words to the song:

*People get ready*

*There's a train a comin'*

*You don't need no baggage, you just get on board*

*All you need is faith*

*To hear the diesel comin'*

*Don't need no ticket*

*You just thank the Lord.*

*People get ready*

*Train to Jordan*

*Picking up passengers from coast to coast*

*Faith is key*

*Open the doors and board them*

*There's hope for all among the love the most.*

*There ain't no room for the hopeless sinner  
Who would hurt all mankind just to save his soul  
Have pity on those whose choices grow thinner  
There ain't no hiding place from the Kingdom's throne.*

- † I wonder if Curtis Mayfield, Bono, and “the Boss” had today’s parable of the Ten Bridesmaids in mind when they performed this song. Maybe, maybe not. I confess that this is one of those parables that I wish Jesus had never told.
- † It seems to say in the parable that we’re meant to take care of ourselves first, make sure we have enough, so that we can be ready when Jesus returns in glory. And that runs counter to everything I understand to be Jesus’ message. After all, aren’t we meant to be generous, self-sacrificing in our living and loving?
- † But there it is anyway, this parable telling us to be ready, even if it means locking the doors on those who aren’t. The question is, what are we meant to be ready for?
- † In the parable, Jesus says be ready for the party, the wedding banquet, and the arrival of the bridegroom. It doesn’t take much imagination to see that he’s talking about himself and the coming kingdom of God.
- † The party we’ve waited for is starting, and if we want to be in on the action, we need to prepare ourselves for what’s coming. If these words make you a little nervous, you’re not alone. They make ME nervous.
- † For all throughout our culture is an obsession with the end times, the end of days. If the sales of the *Left Behind* books, movies, board games, T-shirts, and whatever else are any indication, then we ought to pay close attention to today’s warnings.

- † The message of *Left Behind* is that Jesus is coming back soon, so we should be ready. The followers of that theology see the conflict in the Middle East as evidence that this age is ending and will end in flames. Some people even believe that the election of Barack Obama last week is a sign that the world is coming to an end.
- † Unfortunately those views depart radically and in destructive ways from what the vast majority of scripture has to say. First of all, works like *Left Behind* are obsessed with trying to line up current events with biblical prophecies (which they use as predictions about the future).
- † How ironic that the biblical writers took Jesus' words as comments on events current for THEM, centuries ago—witness Matthew 24:34, for example—to establish when and how Jesus would come again to complete finally and fully his purposes on earth.
- † But Jesus specifically warns against that kind of speculation just paragraphs before this Sunday's gospel, in Matthew 24:36: “No one knows of that day and hour—not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”
- † More seriously, though, the *Left Behind* genre and its followers are mistaken in whose coming it is that we expect. They get the name right, but they seem to think that by the time Jesus' return in glory comes, he will have undergone a complete transformation in personality.
- † Sarah Dylan writes: “They (and especially the horrible and horribly mistitled book *Glorious Appearing*) seem to have Jesus confused with a creature I call the “Christ-inator,” after the robot assassin Arnold Schwarzenaggar played in the first “Terminator” movie—an

unstoppable force, absolutely determined to kill-kill-kill, and empty of any human feeling, let alone compassion, for its victims.”

- † But the person we are expecting is not the “Christ-inator,” but none other than Jesus of Nazareth. If we’ve read the gospels, we know his character, we know who he is. He taught, healed, included, welcomed, freed anyone who would join him, and he was known particularly for his compassion to the poor and the outcast.
- † Even though many Jews expected a warrior Messiah, Jesus defied that image, going even to the cross rather than strike back against violence. That’s what Jesus was like in his first coming, what we call the Incarnation.
- † Will he be different when he comes again? We know the answer! Because he did come back a second time: it’s called Easter. And when he came among the people a second time, what did he do?
- † He walked beside them on the road, cooked them breakfast, ate with them and opened the scriptures to them, assured them of his ongoing presence, and gave them the Holy Spirit, the Comforter.
- † He also told them, and us, that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among you.” His personality and character haven’t changed in those uncountable times he has come among us.
- † When Jesus returns in glory, then, it is not to destroy the world, but to bring it good news. He will return to complete his work in the world. He will come to bring the kingdom of heaven into congruence with creation, and he will call it “very good.”
- † What will that look like? We don’t know, in terms of whether there will be streets of gold or only sunny days or only happy songs in the air.

But we do know that earth will resemble what Jesus tells us in the scriptures the kingdom of God, or of heaven, is like.

- † It will be a world where all have enough, where compassion and mercy abound, where the lost are found, the peacemakers are blessed, and justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
- † So then, how are we to prepare? In the words of the spiritual, how are we to “keep our lamps trimmed and burning?” Surely not by trying to figure out when it will happen. That’s a waste of precious time and energy.
- † Certainly by not simply confessing Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and then going on about our business as usual. *We prepare for the fulfillment of Christ’s purposes on earth by doing what he did.*
- † We prepare for the fulfillment of our prayer: “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We do it by seeking to realize that kingdom here and now, “gaining strength from a life of prayer to engage in a lifetime of pursuing what God pursues.”
- † And yes, we need to make sure we have oil in our lamps. Maybe this is what Jesus is talking about. For when a lamp doesn’t have enough oil, the light goes out. We Christians need in the lamps of our lives to have what keeps us burning brightly.
- † For as Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.” A Christian with no oil, with not enough of whatever fills you up spiritually when you run dry, has nothing to give.
- † What is it that feeds your soul? What is sacred for you? Where do you find God? And how can you make sure you get enough of that oil for your lamp, so that God can fill you up again?

- † Because you will run dry. We all do. Relationships sometimes disappoint and drain us. Our portfolio or our pension is in the tank. Our job security may be uncertain. So what will keep you going?
- † Jesus said, “I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was naked and you clothed me. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was in prison and you visited me. I was sick and you comforted me.”
- † That’s where we are meant to find God, to get the oil to fill our lamps. Not in some scary predictions of a gruesome and bloody arrival of a “Christ-inator.” When we seek to complete the work of Jesus in our own lives, we’ll find those fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
- † You don’t fill your lamp because you are afraid you’ll get locked out of the kingdom of heaven and be “left behind.” You don’t stockpile oil so that you can turn everybody else away and that’s so much fun. You look for God where Jesus said we can find him. Where we do the ministry he asks us to do. When we forgive, offer compassion, work for justice in his name.
- † “People get ready, there’s a train a comin’. You don’t need no baggage, you just get on board. All you need is faith to hear the diesel comin’. You don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.”
- † Amen!

Sources:

This core ideas for this sermon come from Sarah Dylan, in  
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