August 16th, 2020

Springfield Presbyterian Church

I’m Not Even Sure Anymore What Season We Are In.

The 159th Day of March

**The Wise and the Foolish**

I. The Parable’s foundations

The parable we read this morning you may know under two different titles, “The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids” or the “The Parable of the Ten Virgins.” Let’s go with the first title, because the second one probably has its own context, but doesn’t sit well with me, as we start to unpack what we hear in the Word.

The general widespread interpretation of this parable is one that is apocalyptic in nature. It points to Christ as the Bridegroom, with this idea going back to Old Testament origins. The ten women are Christians, coming to meet Christ when he comes to Earth again. Five are wise and have their lamps completely filled, then five are foolish and do not have their lamps filled and at the end of the day, it’s the wise who meet Christ and the foolish are left outside the door. The basic emphasis is: be prepared, you do not know when Christ will be here again, so be vigilant and get ready for the Kingdom to come.

On its face, the general interpretation is good – I would want to encourage all people to be prepared, whether that means reading and delving into Scripture, preparing their hearts in new ways, or shifting their priorities. Yet, I think this parable has much more to teach us than what lies on the surface.

II. Sharing is Caring

While the wise are the ones who are led into the wedding banquet and the ones who ‘won’ and entered the Kingdom, I’m actually not a huge fan of them. From just a basic reading, they may be ‘wise’ but they do not feel ‘Christlike’ – when the foolish ask for help, they turn them away. And yes, perhaps they would not have had enough fluid to keep their lamps burning, but I’m not quite convinced.

When we see someone in need, when our water bottle is filled as we go out for a morning walk and we see someone on the ground in desperate need of water, we wouldn’t say, “Sorry, you should have been prepared.” Rather, you would offer them the water you have and try to help them to the best of your ability. Or you have ten dollars in your pocket and you have an extra five on hand just for emergencies, and someone in front of you at the shop runs out of money by a dollar, would you say, “Sorry, you should have been prepared.” No, you’d cover their need of a dollar.

This is just part of not only being a good Christian, but also generally being a good person. We rely on one another and that is part of the push and pull of humanity. The reality is, we can’t always be “wise” – we can’t always be prepared because we do not know what life will bring. We didn’t know a pandemic was coming, we wouldn’t know that we would need storehouses of bleach and toilet paper and masks. And it wasn’t a matter of being unprepared or unwise, but you can only prepare to some extent for what you know, the rest lies in the hands of God.

You also need the resources to be wise – to be prepared is actually a state of privilege. You have the funds, the monetary means to go out and buy enough food for a certain length of time. You have the ability to store up water and essentials. Chances are, unless you’re into it, you probably do not need to go hunting or fishing to get your protein, but rather you walk in and out of the grocery store. And this is nothing to feel guilty about – but it is to say, being prepared, being wise in this case, is really a matter of privilege.

I think that’s why I struggle to call the ‘foolish’ truly ‘foolish’, at least how we understand the word. Maybe that was all the oil these women could get for the lamp, maybe that’s all their resources provided. I struggle with thinking that they were immature, or stupid, or ignorant – maybe one or two were – but I think the core issue was that these were women who may have not had the opportunity to fill the lamp.

III. Is Jesus mean?

If I go that route, does that mean Jesus only loves the rich and the wise? Ahem. No. Because that idea doesn’t sit with any other parts of who we know Jesus to be in our world. We know that Jesus spent time with the foolish, with the impoverished, with the ones who others would have easily discounted. So how do you reckon with a Jesus that shuts the door after the wise come in and tells the foolish they are too late?

I think here’s a place where we might need to bend into the story a bit, to claim that some of Scripture and some parables and stories do not line up with what we know – whether that’s because of context or culture – but we do know the Christ who welcomes all, and perhaps, it isn’t Jesus we need to focus on in this moment. Perhaps the parable was and remains a message to us, rather than a statement on the values of Jesus.

III. The Call to Share

Maybe, the call is to even the score in this divisive world, to make sure that all have the opportunity to get the provisions they need. If you are prepared, however you deem to see that – wonderful, that’s nothing to feel guilty about – but now go and help prepare others. When the oil in your lamp is overflowing, go and pour some of the extra into someone else’s lamp.

On the other side of the coin, I hope that when and if you are in a place of need, a place where you need the provisions to be prepared, that you have the courage, strength, and muster to ask for help. While I want to assure you that I am doing well these days, I have been in a position where I have had to ask for help. It doesn’t feel great, it feels sometimes sad or lonely or like you aren’t good enough – even if your situation is not at all in your control. When someone asks for help, it often isn’t out of ease, it often comes from the depths of a place where this is the last option.

I hope that wherever you are on this spectrum, and rather than wise or foolish – let’s go with prepared or underprepared – I hope that you are able to name it and live accordingly to the values of giving and receiving that Jesus shows us throughout the Gospels.

IV. What does it mean to be prepared

One of the questions that may linger for you here is one that I cannot answer – what does it mean to be prepared? I wish I could give you a checklist that you could tangibly mark off and feel secure in. Yet I can’t, because to some extent, we will never be truly completely absolutely prepared. But we can work towards it and help our neighbors to work towards this – towards a future where all have enough food for their bodies, where education is equal, where all get the health care they need, where all have a fair shot at a beautiful future.

Instead of the wise walking into the wedding banquet, I hope the Kingdom of God will look like us be holding one another, hand in hand, where we are all ready and there’s plenty to go around in love. That’s the hope I see in the Kingdom, and we are called to begin building the kingdom today, so may you go from this place, dwelling in this Word, and let it move you to contemplation and then to action from a place of love. Amen.