

Sermon for Sunday, September 16, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"IF GOD LOCKS THE PEARLY GATE--AND YOU'RE TOO LATE"

St. Matthew 25:1-13

Text: "And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut."
St. Matthew 25:10

Our meditation this morning may seem somewhat morbid because I want to talk about death and dying, about the second coming of Jesus and the end of the world. Both of these relate to judgment. You see, when you die for all practical purposes judgment for you has come and you will be judged on the basis of the life you live. Or, if Jesus comes again before you die Judgement Day has arrived; you will still be judged on the basis of the life you have lived. That's what our solo was all about this morning. It raises the question about judgment when Jesus comes again and it says, "I wish we'd all been ready." Well, I wish all of us were ready this morning. I fear some of us are not ready. I want us to share together some thoughts about preparedness and getting ready. The question that each of us must face is, if I am not ready now, when do I plan to get ready?

You see, the problem about planning to get ready has some serious flaws in it. First, too many of us plan to get ready but we delay our plans--we keep putting it off. Second, the worst flaw in planning to get ready is that Jesus may come or death may strike before we've finished. Suddenly our plans to get ready are cut short and there isn't any time left.

We never know when death will strike. Just last week a lady deacon at a sister Presbyterian church got up at the board meeting to make a report. Suddenly she slumped over and in a few hours was dead from a massive cerebral accident. Now, there are such things as deathbed confessions. Some such instances are recorded in history and there is even one in the Bible. The thief on the cross cried out to Jesus and Jesus said to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." That was a true deathbed confession. However, one of my seminary professors used to say about that, "God gives us one illustration of a deathbed confession that we may not despair, but he gives us just one in order that we may not presume." So, we would be very foolish indeed if we counted on such a last minute confession to get us into heaven before God locks the gate. First, we might not have a chance to make such a last minute confession, and second, we might be so hardened spiritually by that time (as was the thief on the other cross) that we become incapable of such a confession.

For our scripture this morning we read the parable of the 10 maidens, five wise and five foolish. Their foolishness lay in the fact that they were not prepared. Let me set that parable in historical context for you. I think you will see how important it was and how urgent Jesus felt when he told it, if you see the circumstances under which it was related. Jesus had already entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday--his final time to come to the Holy City. By Friday he is to be crucified. That last week is already far spent. The end is almost upon him. As the end draws near, his teachings become more and more urgent. He has pronounced the seven woes upon the scribes and Pharisees for their falseness; he has spoken already of the signs of the end of time. Now he tells the parable of the ten maidens. In the simplest possible terms he lays out for us all how things will be.

Let me share with you just how relevant and understandable this story was when told to the listeners. In those days Oriental weddings were great affairs. The bride and her friends went to the new home of the husband-to-be. They moved in with all of the furniture and gifts that the bride brought and then preparations were begun for the wedding feast. In the meantime, the groom and his friends got

together for a sort of bachelor's party. Finally, when the stag party was over, the groom and his friends would start out for the new home and the wedding. Friends of the bride would have been sent to meet them with lanterns since it was usually long after dark before the men broke up their party and they needed someone to light the way for them. Now, as often happens with bachelor parties, one might go on inordinately long and the girls sent to meet them would have to wait. The story that Jesus tells is familiar to all of his listeners. They have seen such incidents time and again and most of them have participated in them. As he tells the story, the groom's party drags on and the waiting girls grow tired and sleepy. But at midnight the cry goes up at last that the bridegroom is approaching. Five of the girls have anticipated such a contingency and have brought adequate oil. But five of the girls have not. By midnight their oil supply is exhausted and their lanterns flicker and go out. They hurry off to find additional oil, but when they return the procession has entered the gates of the new home and the gates have been locked. In the dark they beat on the gate to be let in. However, in those days thieves used such tactics to gain entrance to a home and since it is dark, the gatekeeper refuses to let them in. The bridegroom says, "I do not know who you are."

The first point I want to make about his parable is this: The foolish maidens made provision only for the present. They were probably so excited about the wedding and their role in it that they didn't think ahead. They didn't make adequate preparation for the unexpected. They were caught up in the moment and they were not prepared for the future when it arrived.

Isn't this characteristic of most of us? We are so busy living day by day, caught up in the excitement of the moment, that the future seems unreal and we do not prepare for it. When should the girls have prepared the extra oil for the emergency? Why at the very moment they were so busy and excited about going out to meet the bridegroom! So with us! The moment to prepare for eternity is now! The moment to prepare for the future is as we live our daily lives.

Let me put that question to you. Are you daily preparing for eternity? Day by day are you making ready for the judgment? If you are like most of us, as you think about that you will realize that your daily activities are rarely guided by the impact it will have on eternity. If you are like most of us, the things you do day by day are not done with the idea in mind that God will someday judge you by them. Jesus said, "Do not lay up treasures upon earth where rust and moths corrupt and where thieves break through and steal. Rather," he said, "lay up treasures in heaven, for where the treasure is, there is the heart also." If your heart is fixed on the present--if your heart is fixed on what you have--or if your heart is fixed on the things of the world that you are trying to get, your treasure is here. Jesus says we should be laying up treasure in heaven because rust and moths and thieves can't touch that treasure.

But notice a second thing about this parable. No body could prepare for them. Each had to prepare for herself. First they tried to borrow some oil. Now, I don't think Jesus intended to picture the five wise girls as stingy or unkind when they refused to share their oil. Rather, I think he is trying to point out to us that nobody can get ready for us. Nobody can make our preparations in our place. Each of us must get ready for himself.

As a minister I deal often with death. One of my greatest frustrations in attempting to help someone who is terminally ill and who knows it. You see, that is one experience no one can really share with you. Such a person is surrounded by people who love him, people who care about him. Yet, what lies before him is something that he alone can do. No one can enter into it with him. In that sense

there is a loneliness about dying that no other person can really share. No one can get ready for that moment for you. The prayers your mother may have prayed for you as a child, the tears a father may have shed over you as a youngster, the love a wife may have lavished on you, the esteem in which children may hold you--none of these things will serve you then. No, preparedness is non-transferrable. The only girls who got into the wedding feast when the bridegroom came were those who were personally prepared. It shall be so with us. Only those of us who have personally accepted Jesus as Saviour, only those who live a life in obedience to him, shall enter into God's heavenly banquet before he locks the gate forever.

Billy Graham once said that being born in a Christian home doesn't make you a Christian any more than being born in a garage apartment makes you an automobile. There is simply nothing automatic about being a Christian and being ready to meet your Saviour face to face. It is something each must do for himself. One of my officers and I had lunch together this past week. He said, "You know, we accumulate knowledge in every area of life. In medicine, engineering and other fields, students don't start from scratch. They have accumulated knowledge of others on which to build. But," he said, "with being a Christian every generation has to start over." And, you know, he is absolutely right. Every generation starts from square one. Each must prepare for himself. As a friend of mine once put it, God has no grandchildren--just children. So, there is no such thing as a second generation Christian. So, if you are not prepared for eternity, no one can do it for you.

There is a third point I want to make. First, the foolish girls prepared only for the present; second, when the time came, no one could prepare for them; but notice thirdly that when the time came and they were not ready, there was no need for them. By the time they went and found oil and came back it was too late. The other girls had already led the wedding procession to the feast and their services were not needed--their job had been done by someone else and the opportunity for service was past.

Everyday God gives us opportunities for service. He gives us chances to witness and share, chances to help, chances to reach out in love to people who are hurting and bleeding from life's wounds. But God's kingdom is not limited by us. One sad day we shall discover to our dismay that our services are no longer needed--the job has been done and the opportunity for service is past.

Before the birth of Jesus, for centuries the Jews had looked forward to the time when God's Saviour would come. But, as the centuries went by and still he did not come, with their lips they may have said they believed, but in their hearts the dream had died. Surely he would not come--at least not in their lifetime. And then one night there was a tap on an innkeeper's door. He was not prepared and there was no room for them there. Yet, God was ready though the innkeeper was not. Jesus was born just the same. God was not limited by the readiness of the innkeeper and the innkeeper's chance was past--his services were no longer needed.

Jesus has said he will come again. The centuries roll by and still he has not come. With our minds and our lips we confess his second coming, but in our hearts the dream grows dim. But when death comes--or Jesus comes--will we be ready? An innkeeper wasn't ready and his chance slipped by forever. Are you ready? If not, when will you be ready--tomorrow? Next month? Next year? What if Jesus comes and God locks the gate--and you're too late?