**Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning**

**Text: Matthew 25:13**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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When he was a young man, my Granddad Ervin had a Ford dealership; shortly before he left home to serve in World War I. In those days, in a small town on the Great Plains, you didn’t just sell cars, you *built* them. To be sure, they were partly manufactured on Mr. Ford’s assembly line in Detroit, but it was cheaper to ship the cars in several pieces, so they arrived at the depot in Danbury, Nebraska with some assembly required. Well, the very first shipment from Detroit had arrived, Granddad and his crew – which included my Uncle Bert – had assembled their first car, and now they all wanted to test it. So they stood in front of the Ford Garage on Main St. while the men took turns driving that Model T once around the block. That’s when my Great-Granddad came along. Old Man Ervin, they called him. As he watched his son and these other young bucks driving this contraption, he figured he could do it as well. So he got behind the wheel, and he drove around the block one time, and then he drove around a second time, and when he came around the third time he yelled, “Bert, next time I come around you jump on this thing, show my how to stop it!”

It pays to plan ahead. It pays to be prepared. My stint as a Boy Scout was short and not very fruitful, but at least I learned the motto: “Be prepared!”

Which is a lesson that the foolish bridesmaids in today’s scripture never learned. I mean, if you’re going to burn the midnight oil, you’d better plan ahead and make sure that you’ve got some oil to burn! That’s what the 5 wise bridesmaids did, and the 5 foolish ones failed to do. Not that Jesus is really talking about bridesmaids burning the midnight oil. No, he’s really talking about being prepared for the coming Kingdom of God; but here, as elsewhere, he’s using a parable to make his point, and he’s having a little fun with his listeners in the process.

You see, Jesus had a sense of humor. He sets up this scene where 10 bridesmaids are waiting for the bridal party to show-up, and eventually the groom appears, but where’s the bride? Whoever heard of a wedding banquet without a bride? And, the groom goes into the banquet, *on his wedding night*, accompanied *not* by his bride, but by 5 bridesmaids. Or, as another translation puts it, 5 *virgins*. I mean, what’s wrong with this picture?!

As if that wasn’t enough to get his listeners laughing, Jesus has the other 5 bridesmaids looking to buy oil at *midnight*. Nobody is going to be selling lamp oil in the middle of the night! By this time, the folks who are listening to these parables in Matthew 25 are howling with laughter. Which means that Jesus has them right where he wants them. He uses laughter to draw them in, and then he makes his point: “Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of Man is coming” (Matthew 25:13).

It pays to plan ahead. It pays to be prepared. The second coming of Jesus, the completion of the Kingdom of God – or, as Matthew calls it, the Kingdom of Heaven – these issues were very much on the minds of Matthew’s listeners as he retold the stories of Jesus in the latter part of the 1st century. The first Christians expected Jesus to return at any time. They were prepared. They were trying to live each day exactly the way that Jesus taught them to live: loving their neighbor, sharing their property, refusing to engage in violence of any kind, even if attacked. It was very much counter-cultural. And if the world rejected them and killed them because of their refusal to conform, so what? Jesus would return soon and the dead would be raised and because they had prepared for his coming by living according to his teachings, they would be going into the Great Banquet of the Kingdom of Heaven.

But by the time that Matthew is written, we’re into the second and even the third generation of Christians. It’s been maybe 50 years since the Crucifixion, and still Jesus hasn’t returned. In the words of the parable, “the bridegroom was delayed.” And the more uncertain it became that Jesus would *ever* return, the harder it became to live according to the norms of the Kingdom, and the easier it became to conform to the spirit-crushing, violent, exploitative norms of the Roman world. Even in the Church! Increasingly, the followers of Jesus were becoming less like the *wise* bridesmaids and more like the *foolish* ones: they weren’t prepared.

It pays to plan ahead. That’s the message, of course, in the African-American spiritual *Keep your Lamps Trimmed and Burning:*

Mother, don’t stop your prayin’

Father, keep right on prayin’

Keep your lamps trimmed and burnin’

For this old world’s almost done.

In other words, don’t settle for what’s easy and comfortable in the short term. Keep your eyes on the prize of that long-term goal of the Kingdom. Be prepared for its coming. Be prepared for the future. Be prepared for the *ultimate* future of the Reign of God: on earth, as it is in heaven.

Which is exactly what we’re *not* doing. Short-sightedness is all too common today in so many spheres of life. In the corporate world, the Congress, and even the Church, we tend to be focused on the next quarter’s stock values, or the next election, or the next event and how much it might cost. And, yes, one has to have one eye on such short-term goals. When you’re driving up to Martinsville, you need to be aware of what’s happening right in front of you, lest you hit a construction cone or – worse yet – a construction worker. But you also have to be looking way down the road, lest you don’t see the long line of traffic that’s stopped a quarter mile ahead until it’s too late and you can’t stop.

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. Plan ahead. Let’s look briefly at all 3 of those spheres of life that I just flagged, because Jesus has some advice for all of them.

If I’m the head of a corporation, I need to remember that what’s profitable in the short-term may not be good for the company – or for the economy – over the long haul. So I need to plan ahead. You know who invented the digital camera? Kodak. You know who almost went under because they failed to capitalize on digital technology? Kodak. They had the new technology decades ago. But their film cameras were so profitable that they were reluctant to take the risk and invest in their own invention. They went for the short-term gain, rather than the long-term pain. You know what? The long-term pain often pays off. Other companies *did* invest in digital technology, the public moved in that direction, Kodak lost market share, and now they are a mere shadow of their former selves. It’s a foolish bridesmaid who doesn’t plan ahead, and the same is true of a foolish corporation.

Right now, U.S. non-financial corporations have $1.7 trillion in cash reserves, with Apple and Microsoft leading the way. Now of course prudent financial planning means that you keep some cash in reserve – that’s why we have savings accounts – but $1.7 trillion? With more to come if the tax reform proposals before the Congress become law. At some point you have to invest some of that money in new products and new workers if you’re going to grow your company and grow the economy. But that involves dreaming and risking and planning ahead. If you don’t dream and risk and plan, you’re like the rich man in another one of Jesus’ parables, who just kept building bigger barns to store his abundant crops, but he never actually did anything with his surplus. And if he died that very night, there would be no way to take it with him (Luke 12:13-21). You have to dream and risk and plan. Otherwise your company will suffer and the economy will suffer and the country will suffer. And what makes folks on Capitol Hill think that giving tax breaks to corporations will give them the incentive to dream and risk and plan and hire and make those investments, when they already have *plenty* of cash that they’re *not* investing? Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, or you’re going to find yourselves lost in the darkness.

As with corporations, so with the Congress. Maybe the only investments that interest the folks on Capitol Hill are the contributions that those cash-flush corporations will make to their reelection campaigns. “Never mind the kind of risking and planning that might be good for the country, just help me get reelected!” That seems to be the myopic mantra of our members of Congress. You know, if we’re going to run-up the nation’s deficit by another $1.5 trillion anyway – that’s where the current tax reform proposals are headed – why not do that by investing directly in American workers? The federal government ought to pay for 2 years of tuition-free education at Ivy Tech and other community colleges so that our young men and women will have the skills they need to be hired and compete in our high-tech economy. Maybe then the corporations would take the risk of spending some of their cash reserves, because at least they’d have workers who were worth the risk of investing in. Keep those lamps trimmed and burning, or we’re going to find ourselves lost in the darkness!

But it’s not just corporations and the Congress who are acting like the foolish bridesmaids, it’s also the Church. It’s easy to get self-righteous about this stuff, until we look at our own lack of dreaming and planning and risk taking. I once served a church that had $100,000 in cash reserves. $100,000! But they were collecting quarters for their mission projects. Each Sunday they were putting out jars, trying to nickel and dime their way to the Kingdom. They were flush with cash, but they wouldn’t dare engage in some dreaming and planning and risk-taking that might help them grow the church, better serve their community and make the Reign of God more of a lived reality in their midst. Sometimes in the Church we’re even more foolish than the foolish bridesmaids. We have the oil to burn, we just refuse to burn it! We have the means to pierce the darkness with the light of faith, hope and love, but for some reason we prefer to stumble along in the dark. And I’m not talking about just one congregation, I’m talking about far too many congregations all across North America.

How ironic that we fail to plan for the future, when Jesus’ whole ministry was *focused* on the future. With every word that Jesus said, every act of compassion that Jesus did, the future reality of the Kingdom that God had long promised was breaking into the midst of 1st century Palestine; and folks refused to see it. The future Kingdom was made flesh right before their eyes in Jesus Christ, but they refused to recognize it. And even if *most* of his audience didn’t get it, you’d think that the *Church* would; you’d think that the Body of Christ – called into being to carry on Jesus’ work – would look into the future and dream and plan and risk so that at least a bit of that future might come in the flesh today. Our failure to do so is almost as funny as 5 bridesmaids looking for an oil dealer who’s open at midnight.

But hear the good news. The Kingdom whose coming we are to prepare for is already here; at least in some sense. Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is in your midst (Luke 17:21). It’s within us as individuals and all around us as a community of faith. The Quakers speak of it as the spark of the Divine that is in each and every one of us. A good Quaker will tell you to mind the light. And there’s nothing that we can do to extinguish that light. No mistake that we might make is so big, no financial boondoggle in which we might engage is so foolish, that it would put out the light and leave us in darkness forever. The light of Christ shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. *You* can’t put it out, *I* can’t put it out, *we* can’t put it out. There’s no way that we can fail that badly, so there’s no point in being afraid of failure, *period*. The Kingdom will come. The Light of Christ will accomplish much in your hearts, in this community, in this nation, in this world, whether we do anything about it or not. So we might as well join the party. We might as well risk and dream and plan and even spend some money and engage in ministry. The only thing that will come even close to failure is not even trying in the first place. So keep your lamps trimmed and burning. The foolish bridesmaids failed to plan, and they found themselves locked-out of the party. This is one instance where Jesus does *not* say, “Go and do likewise.” Amen.