

Living on Borrowed Faith

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Matthew 25:1-13

Sermon Series:
iReady?

*Am I ready
(iReady) for
Christ's
coming?*

I have a recurring dream; a nightmare, really! I oversleep Sunday morning. I awaken to find that I've slept through the 8:00 service; the middle service is already in progress. I rush to church and am met at the curb by an annoyed elder who hands me my robe. I walk into the 9:30 service at the time of the sermon. I start to preach, but the words don't flow. The feeling is one of indescribable embarrassment. I desperately want to get away.

Fortunately, I wake up. It's an exquisite relief to wake up and realize—it was only a dream!

Those who study dreams describe these feelings of being ill-prepared as a common recurrence in dreams. Maybe you've had dreams of feeling unprepared for a big presentation or a test of some kind.

It's my practice Sunday morning to rise early to commit each sermon to memory. I began this discipline years ago as a way to engage people in the sermon. So, if I oversleep, I'm toast.

To compensate, I set several alarms every Sunday morning. I don't know why I bother. I am so conscious of oversleeping that I awaken well before the alarm.

We're talking this Advent season about being prepared for Christ's coming. When we think

of Christ's coming, we typically gravitate to Christ's first coming at Bethlehem. We don't talk much about his second coming, which is rather odd, given how much Jesus talks about it. As I said last Sunday, since Jesus' return cannot possibly be determined with any certainty, our only recourse is to be ready whenever he comes.

That's why we've titled this series of sermons, "iReady." It's a take off on our infatuation with iPhones and iPods. Am I ready for Christ's return? What can I do to prepare for his coming?

Matthew 25 is a parable about Jesus' coming. It's called the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids or, alternatively, the Parable of the Ten Virgins. Virgin is an old-fashioned word used to describe these young unmarried bridesmaids in the parable. The use of this word dates back to a time, let's just tell it like it is, when young, unmarried bridesmaids would, in fact, be virgins.

The danger of this or any other parable is getting bogged down in the details. Let me illustrate, citing the quandary of insufficient oil in today's parable. Why don't the bridesmaids with extra oil share with those who are running low? Their refusal to share strikes me as rather snotty. Don't they know about sharing? Haven't they heard Jesus say it's better to give than to receive?

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But this asks more of the parable than it's intended to communicate. Parables are not allegories, in which every element has hidden meaning. Some people want to make this parable into an allegory. The bridegroom represents Christ, the ten bridesmaids depict the church and the foolish bridesmaids portray the last judgment. Parables don't work this way. They communicate one essential truth. Parables are meant to draw unsuspecting listeners into the story and catch them up short with a surprise ending. Jesus uses parables to arrest his listeners, much like a riddle or joke catches people off-guard.

Jesus draws his parables from everyday life. Weddings certainly qualify. Weddings were a big deal in Jesus' day. Everybody in town was invited to a wedding, which would last for a week or more. Brides and grooms did not go on a honeymoon in those days. They would stay for the duration of the wedding to visit with family and friends, which makes perfect sense to me. Newlyweds often lament that they don't have time in an evening reception to visit with their guests.

The bride and her attendants in our story assemble at the bride's house to wait for the groom. The groom's role is to escort the bride to his parents' home. To add a little drama and intrigue to the celebration, the groom would typically delay his arrival. We read in verse 5 that the groom is delayed. Circle this word delayed.

It will feature prominently in the story.

It's now midnight (25:6) and the waiting has morphed into a slumber party. The bridesmaids have become drowsy with waiting and are sacked out in the bride's home. They awaken to shouts that the bridegroom has arrived. Come and meet him. The party is on. The bridesmaids wipe the sleep from their eyes—it's their time to shine. They must illumine the way to the reception.

The groom's delay now necessitates more oil for their lamps. The so-called wise bridesmaids have come prepared with extra flasks of oil. The foolish ones are caught empty-handed. They must now go and buy more oil. I don't know where they will buy oil at midnight. Walmarts don't yet exist.

I can't read this parable without the song from church camp coming to mind: "Give me oil for my lamp, keep me burning, give me oil for my lamp, I pray. Give me oil for my lamp, keep me burning. Keep me burning to the break of day."

When we fast-forward to the end of the parable, the bride and groom have now arrived at the party, courtesy of the five wise bridesmaids (25:10). The tardy bridesmaids also make it with more oil in hand, only to find themselves locked out (25:11). When they knock, the groom, of all people, answers the door. Can't you picture them holding their newly purchased oil aloft as their ticket of entry? Here's another place where the details of this parable get in the way. The

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groom acts like he doesn't even know them. He, in fact, says so in verse 12: "I don't know you." When I read this, I'm left wondering, what do you mean you don't know them? They're in your wedding party! I would have expected him to say, "Martha, Mary, you made it. We were wondering what happened to you." His reaction seems over the top. What do you mean you don't know them? Is the door really closed for some people?

The Greek word for know suggests an intimate, first hand knowledge of someone. If you were to ask me whether I know President Obama, I might tell you that I feel as though I know him. I've listened to him speak countless times and seen lots of pictures of him, including ones with Michelle and their two daughters. I talk as if I know President Obama, but I don't actually know him. I know of him, but I don't actually know him.

But if you asked me whether I know my wife, I would answer emphatically. Yes, I know Chris James—let me count the ways. I have a first hand, intimate knowledge of her. I could regale you with stories about her, as she could about me. But our lips are sealed! It's precisely this kind of personal, first hand knowing that Jesus has in mind when he ends his parable.

So, what is the point of Jesus' parable and what difference does it make in my life? Let me tell it to you straight. We cannot live on borrowed faith. Each of us must have our own personal relationship

with Jesus Christ. No one else can have it for us. It doesn't matter if our parents or spouse's friends have faith. The only issue in question is whether we have faith.

I've heard Billy Graham say, "God has no grandchildren." God only has children. Faith cannot only be inherited. It must be personalized.

Anne Graham Lotz writes in her book, *Magnificent Obsession*, about growing up as the daughter of Billy Graham. It doesn't matter if her dad, as a world-famous evangelist, has faith. It doesn't matter if her mother, who comes from a long line of missionaries and pastors, has faith. The only thing that matters is whether Anne has faith.

This morning, I have the distinct honor of baptizing our grandson, Luke Andrew James. Talk about a Biblical name. Luke wrote one of the four gospels and the book of Acts, the basis of our last sermon series. Andrew and James are two of Jesus' original 12 disciples. Both sets of Luke's grandparents seek to follow Christ and are active church members. One grandfather is a Presbyterian elder and the other is yours truly. Luke's father leads a ministry in the marketplace to young men in their 20s and 30s, and his mom is a musician here. But you know something? None of this qualifies him to be a Christian. God has no grandchildren. The only thing that matters is whether Luke will follow Jesus Christ with his life. We can't do it for him. There must come a time when his inherited faith becomes his personal faith. Each generation must be converted to

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Christ. Each generation must reaffirm this covenant with God all over again.

Why then do we baptize? The primary reason we baptize has nothing to do with our will or choice. Baptism symbolizes God's covenant extended to us and to our children (we need to talk more about this word covenant in our church). His parents confirm this covenant by their vow to raise their son in a Christian home. We, as a congregation of God's people, pledge to support them in this endeavor.

No one can be put right with God on the basis of someone else's faith. Some things can't be borrowed. Faith is like that. We cannot live on the borrowed spiritual capital of friends and family. Maybe you are here out of force of habit. Maybe you are living on borrowed faith.

Let me go back to the question, is the door really closed for some people? If faith is a relationship with Jesus Christ, there will invariably come a time when Jesus either says the relationship exists or doesn't exist. Some day it will be too late to believe. I never knew you because you never bothered to know me.

Do you know Jesus Christ? Do you have a personal, first hand knowledge of him? Do you know about Christ or do you really know him? Are you ready to meet him if he comes today? That, after all, is the punch line to Jesus' parable. "Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (25:13).

Have you been introduced to Jesus Christ? Will there be any need for introductions when you arrive on the other side?

If you have been introduced, what do you need to do to get to know him better? There are lots of opportunities for you to get to know Jesus Christ in this church. But you're not going to do anything about it now—not with only 12 shopping days left till Christmas. But when the New Year rolls around and you start thinking about resolutions, make it a priority to get to know Jesus Christ.

The way forward is to start at the beginning. If you want to know Jesus Christ, I invite you to open your heart and pray with me the prayer printed at the end of this morning's bulletin.

Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins and extend to me the unconditional gift of love and forgiveness. I endeavor from this moment forward to live for you and follow you as Lord. I trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become. Fill me with your Spirit's presence so that I may share this faith and love with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus' name. Amen.

