

*May 21, 2011*

Matthew 25:1-13 November 12, 2017 Pastor Roger Barkley

It's been more than twenty years since Vivienne stood before me and said, "I do".

We got married in a beautiful backyard ceremony at a friend's home overlooking Aliso Canyon ... but I am afraid that for some people the most memorable thing about that afternoon was the wait.

And, oh, did we wait!

The woman who took charge of her hair and makeup as a wedding gift dragged it out and took forever – much to Vivienne's embarrassment.

She came from a different culture where waiting for the bride to appear is considered a way of bestowing honor upon her – so despite Vivienne's pleas to hurry, she deliberately took her time.

Unaware of the frustration Vivienne was enduring inside the house, our friends began joking that she was having second thoughts about me, but as the clock ticked on and on, our guests became more and more annoyed.

Four or five decades after Jesus' crucifixion, members of Matthew's church were feeling the same way.

"Where's Jesus?"

"Hadn't He, the Son of Man, promised to return on clouds of heaven with power and glory?"

The fledgling church was facing a crisis as people began asking, "Have we been wrong about this whole thing?"

That's why they remembered this particular parable – the prudent and foolish bridesmaids.

Before we go any further, I still have a \$5 Starbucks gift card left over from our contest on Reformation Sunday.

I'll give it to the first person who knows why I titled this sermon, *May 21, 2011*.

Answer: Harold Camping's famous, and highly promoted prediction that the world would end (and the Rapture would occur) on that day. You may remember seeing some of his billboards around the Valley.

Over the past several weeks, we've followed Jesus' confrontations with religious leaders in Matthew 21 through 23.

They questioned his authority and challenged the inclusiveness of his message.

Then, Matthew 24 is devoted to Jesus' apocalyptic teachings about the End Times.

After making a solemn promise to return and set things right, he cautions:

*Matthew 24:36, 42 But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.... Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.*

Then, in Matthew 25, Jesus gathers his closest disciples on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem for lessons about how to wait ... how to live as faithful Christians while waiting for the End Times.

Wedding festivities typically began with the procession of the bride and groom, and lasted seven days.

In today's parable, the bridesmaids were most likely waiting at the brides' home for the groom to come and fetch her to process to the groom's family home where the wedding would take place.

We are not told why the groom is delayed, but a groom's delay was not uncommon.

It's possible that there were last minute negotiations between the groom's and bride's families over the gifts exchanged, but for whatever reason the hour has grown late and all the bridesmaids have fallen asleep.

Last week, Rommel shared about why he and his family are active in our church ... and in case you don't know, they drive all the way from the northern Santa Clarita Valley to be here.

First impressions matter so much that research shows that most church visitors unconsciously decide whether to return within the first three minutes of arriving.

What was the Sacan family's first impression?

All these years later, Rommel still remembers Chrys Leser's warm greeting and her interest in their little girl.

Now, I tell that story because Chrys had cancer that made her particularly aware that her end times were coming.

Yet she lived her faith every day – not just welcoming people to church, but taking special interest in the children and teens.

She'd make time to talk with them, attend special events with them, and take personal interest in their lives.

And, of course, she was a great friend to many, unobtrusively sharing with everyone the strength she'd received from Christ.

Whether you believe in the Rapture or not, the fact is that we all face and (an) end time when we will meet our Maker.

The latest research shows that the mortality rate for Christians is hovering around 100%.

What matters is what we do with the days we are given to live.

There is a significant (and nowadays influential) segment of the Christian community that believes that issues like environmental care are unimportant because someday Jesus will return and make all things new.

Why worry about rising sea levels, depleted forests and poisoned air if Jesus is going to return and set everything right?

But we each have a relatively brief time in this life – seven or eight decades if we are lucky.

And during those years we are responsible for what we make of our life, our relationships, and our world.

First of all, we are responsible for becoming more Christlike – forgiving, compassionate, involved.

Life becomes our classroom, and every person we meet becomes our teacher.

Second, we are responsible for being peace-makers and standing-up for justice.

God has entrusted our planet, our society to our care.

Our stewardship of that sacred trust is a measure of our faithfulness to Jesus.

Imagine if Martin Luther King had just said, well these lynchings and this segregation stink, but someday Jesus will set it all right – and left it at that.

Imagine if Cesar Chavez had said, working in the agricultural fields for slave wages while pesticides are sprayed all over us really stinks, but someday Jesus will set it all right – and left it at that.

Imagine if Chrys Leser had said, greeting new people at church and investing in those kids is a hassle ... I just need church to just be “me time” ... anyway, Jesus will set it all right – and left it at that.

It is during this waiting time that we are called to mature in our Christian faith, engage in Jesus’ mission, and experience the joys of a full, balanced life.

In third century, St. Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is the person fully alive.”

What does being fully alive mean?

Abraham Heschel wrote, “Our goal should be to live life in *radical amazement* .... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

I heard someone on a podcast the other day explain that he had attended some workshop where the facilitator led an exercise in which everyone wrote their own obituary.

He joked that at first this sounded creepy, but it got him thinking.

He found himself asking, “What would I say my recent life has been?”

Binge watching Netflix, scrolling through Facebook, all night computer games, bickering with his wife.

Like sand on the beach, life can pour through our fingers unless we are aware.

*Radical amazement.*

A full life begins by being awake, knowing your passions, knowing your goals, knowing your values and then living them.

Not waiting for circumstances to get better,

Not waiting for others to get on board.

Not waiting for your bank account to hit some magic number ... living your values now.

Living your sacred life now, because this is the one and only chance you'll get.

That's really what our stewardship program is about.

What do I stand for?

What really matters?

And then putting some of our time and our money toward those things.

That requires deliberate focus, because we are so easily distracted ... often by the trivial, sometimes by what is *good* - but not what we *most value*.

The biggest enemy of the best is the good.

In today's scripture, I wonder if the actual act of foolishness was when those who didn't bring enough oil ran off to look for more.

Obviously, it would have been better to have brought extra oil.

Or it would have been great if those with reserves to have shared.

But instead of welcoming the bridegroom imperfectly prepared, they ran off in search of a store open at midnight – and so missed him altogether.

The Kingdom of Heaven is not just our afterlife, it is also about our here and now, and the foolish bridesmaids missed out on their life in Christ in their here and now.

That's the sin ... they got distracted and entirely missed the groom, the procession, the ceremony.

We can miss life by waiting for perfection, or for security, or by failing to take stock of our greatest values.

*Ephesians 3:18-19 And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.*

Will Willimon started his career in rural Georgia, and has gone on to become an author, respected preacher and bishop in the Methodist church.

He recalled attending a funeral in a back-woods, off-brand Baptist church one sunny afternoon.

He later said it was unlike anything he had ever seen.

Standing over the casket the preacher flayed his arms and thundered, "It's too late for Joe!"

"He might have wanted to do this or that in his life, but it's too late for him now!"

"He's dead. It's all over."

"He might have wanted to straighten out his life, but he can't now. It's finished!"

Willimon was greatly disturbed, sarcastically thinking to himself, "Well, this is certainly a great comfort for this grieving family!"

The minister continued: "But it ain't too late for you! People drop dead every day, so why wait?!"

“Too late for Joe but not for you! Make your life count, wake up and come to Jesus now!”

Driving out of the church’s dirt parking lot, Willimon was indignant as he said to his wife, “That was the worst thing I ever heard. Can you imagine a preacher doing that to a bereft family?”

He couldn’t let it go.

Pounding the steering wheel, he said, “I’ve never heard anything so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate! I would never preach a sermon like that.”

His wife agreed

She said, “You’re right, you would never preach like that. It was tacky, it was calloused, it was manipulative.

But then she added, “And of course, the worst part is that everything he said was true.”