

I hope it doesn't come as a huge shock to you – but I have never been a bridesmaid! I have been a Best Man, and I have presided at quite a few weddings, but I have never been a bridesmaid, not even when I wear my kilt!

Bridesmaids can drive Pastors crazy – sometimes they are gigglier, more excited, more emotional, more stressed even than the bride! There are times when I wish we could sell tickets to the Wedding Rehearsals we have here at church. Imagine the Reality TV trucks in the parking lot - “Will they or won't they?” Will they or won't get it right on their big day? What disasters will unfold in the hours leading up the ceremony? Will the dresses fit, the tuxedos match? Will the organist wake up on time? Will the power get turned back on? Will the Pastor remember? And that is before we even start thinking about all that can go wrong with flower girls and ring bearers and photographers... anyway back to these bridesmaids in Jesus' parable.

Turns out five of them were Girl Scouts, and all of them earned their Gold Award because they came prepared. Five of them were in the mold of Melanie Hamilton, while the other five were Scarlett O'Hara. Five were Michelle Wei rather than Lindsay Lohan; Christiane Amanpour not Kim Kardashian. These Girl Scouts not only had on their finery they had fuel for their fire. As well as oil for their skin they had oil for their lamps.

Likely most of us can identify with one of these two groups Yeah, that would have been me, there's no way I was going to miss out on this Wedding Feast, I would have taken the biggest purse I owned, making sure I had plenty of supplies. And actually we feel pretty, and pretty smug about having everything together – just like our moms always told us. Those other bridesmaids – well actually we haven't really talked much to them since they failed cotillion.

Others of us know we are in the other group – the ones without the oil! That is us, here, and there and everywhere, last minute planning, little forethought, unprepared. Sure some folks find us flighty and charming but inside we are quite guilty about how we never quite seem to get on top of things. And yes, we do resent the fact that our sorority sisters wouldn't share their oil with us – if our unmatched shoes had been on the other feet we would certainly have helped them!

Oh yes, you groomsmen, you fall into the same categories! Some of us are always looking ahead, planning the next few moves, aware of our surroundings, loaded down with enough equipment to make an assault on Mt. Everest. Do you need something, we have it – if Bob Vila uses it we have it! Gadget is our middle name!

On the other hand, Dumb and Dumber, isn't all that far off the mark for some of us – Homer-Simpson like some of us are forever wandering into some new situation without any thought or preparation – and that new situation may well be the brick wall into which we have just crashed.

There is an extreme tension in this parable when the foolish bridesmaids run out of lamp oil. The wise, sufficiently prepared for the feast, do not share their reserves. As a result, those without oil are shut out of the wedding banquet. There is a blunt directness, even a scary starkness, in this story that will see many preachers run and hide in the sermonic bushes of ambiguity, allegory, or advice-giving. But I suggest that it is into the directness of this parable, as disturbing as it may seem, that we must wade to find our sermon. We must be very wary of those interpretations that reduce the inevitable tension of this passage.

For example, we must not twist this incident into an excuse to not share out of abundance. The message of this parable is NOT that God helps only those who help themselves. Nor is this parable about lamp oil— we must refuse the allegorical substitution of oil with some Christian commodity such as prayer or faith or love with which we should be amply supplied.

No this passage is about the unpredictable yet certain coming of the kingdom of God. And both of those adjectives matter. The timing of God's coming kingdom is indeed unpredictable. "No one knows the day or hour" according to no less an expert on the end times than Jesus.

The unpredictable yet certain coming of the kingdom of God means that all of us Christians need to be prepared, all of the time. We need to be alive, sensitive, attuned, and expectant of God's arrival in our midst. Is this unpredictability unsettling? For sure, it is worse than watching Cam Newton run and throw the football, worse than the daily gyrations in the stock market – it'll drive you crazy this unpredictable yet certain kingdom of God! Being Presbyterians, we would prefer an orderly God, one who arrives on schedule, at our convenience, decently and in order, who gives us at least a heads up that he's on his way, thank you very much.

And so, since we can neither control nor tame this wild, unpredictable God we must remain in a state of heightened awareness, of expectant readiness for God's coming, God's advent.

God comes to us not just at the end of the ages, but also when we gather to worship God each week – so be ready, be prepared!

God comes to us as we share in the gifts that are ours through the word and sacraments of the church – so be ready, be prepared!

God also comes to us in the face of our neighbor's need - so be ready, be prepared!

God comes to us in every moment when we have the opportunity to express faith, demonstrate love, share our gifts.

At the same time, this passage promises that the coming of God's kingdom while unpredictable is also certain. Regardless of the apparent delays, the kingdom will come, and when it comes it will be cause for great celebration. This confidence makes a difference, it prevents our expectancy from dissolving into terror at the thought of the coming of the Lord, a very reassuring comfort especially to those of us who grew up in churches where "hell and damnation" and "fire and brimstone" was our steady diet.

The unpredictable yet certain coming of the kingdom of God described in this parable is not just a warning, though it is a warning, but above all else the unpredictable yet certain coming of the kingdom of God is a Promise!

As you already know, and as you will see promises have a peculiar capacity to create what is required. For instance, promise your child that you will play soccer with her after work and she is likely to have her shoes, shin guards, and ball ready when you come home.

Promise a friend a night on the town and he will probably be waiting for you to arrive at your pre-arranged rendezvous.

Promise to take a friend to a show or the newest great restaurant in town and you will have their undivided attention and their calendar will be wide open.

Promises create the preparedness necessary to receive them, at least if the promise maker is trustworthy. Jesus our promise maker is both trustworthy and faithful. Jesus will eventually go to the cross to attest to the integrity of his promises.

The promise of the parable is that we are all welcome at the Feast, at the Banquet shared with God and all the other poor and weak sinners welcomed in by God.

To get prepared for the kingdom of God means "being faithful over a little", it means loving and caring for the lost and the lonely, the weak and the oppressed, the sick and the hungry.

The pledge of our time, talent and treasure to God's work through our congregation is one place we can begin to be "faithful over a little" – responding to God's promises. We can all know that our pledges are our having oil to light the coming of the Bridegroom as we witness to His coming and as we work and pray and worship together to the glory of God. Each pledge, each promise, each offering helps open us and others to the loving, justice-filled reign of God, each pledge nurtures the whole, teasing us forward into faith, converting us to community, setting us free to serve our brothers and sisters.

We are all caught up in the demanding yet reliable chronos time of our lives, our schedules, appointments, and deadlines, and so the unpredictable interruption of God's kairos time is rather alarming – we can't enter it on our I-Phones or our Blackberrys! But the parable tells us that this sense of alarm is exactly what we need. The announcement of God's coming—whether at the end of time or right now hidden in our ongoing life of faith or in the immediate needs of others—should shake us up, should invite us to take stock of our values and priorities, should jump start us into taking God seriously.

Over the past weeks of our stewardship focus I and my colleagues who have preached have reminded and challenged you to do just this, to take God seriously. Holly reminded us of the command to offer to God our first fruits within the context of faith and worship; Mark Adams from his unique perspective invited us to wrestle with what it is we are to give to Caesar and what it is we are to give to God, last week at the Church Retreat Mary Katherine preached about what it means to use all the gifts given to us by God as we live as the Body of Christ and John reminded us of the grave danger of creating our own golden calf, out of the very means and fabric of our lives seeking to replace God.

The golden calf incident connects very well to the need to have oil to welcome the bridegroom, and so it is for all of us we need to be nudged and nudge ourselves to live more fully faithfully, with a changed and renewed focus. In my third fall as your Pastor, in my third stewardship season, I say to you very seriously

Our focus needs to be less ACC and more OAPC

Less SEC and more W.O.R.D.S.

Less Heisman Watch, more Amazing Grace.

Our center must be the Lamb of God not the Tigers,

The Dove of the Spirit not the Gamecocks,

G.O.D. not BCS!

Our concern must not just be the past but be all about a just future;

Not GOP nor D.E.M's nor OWS (Occupy Wall street) nor TPE (Tea Party Express) but the Body of Christ;

Not standings in the polls – political or coaches – but our standing before our Lord.

What matters is: not me but Thee,

Not mine but thine,

Pledging not to Pi Kappa Alpha but to Gamma Omega Delta.

I hope some of this makes sense to you, I trust that most all of us have a sense that it is true, that we know in ourselves that we need a renewed focus, that we need to light our lamps, that we are aware that now is a time to move from where we are closer to where God needs us to be...

And of course, all of this needs to be reflected in how we pledge today and how we contribute on that pledge and promise to God. And yes, if you need to, you can rip open your pledge card envelope and change what you are ready to promise in the light of the unpredictable yet certain coming of the Kingdom of God showing what really and only matters. As you make your contributions faithfully and fully and gladly, as you participate and serve, as you let God's gifts be lived through you, you can be at peace and know that you have made God's work in the world a priority. I doubt that any of us will ever find ourselves saying "I think I gave too much to the God."

The promise of the arrival of the unpredictable yet certain kingdom of God is what holds us together, what describes our life as a church, giving us our vision and purpose, uniting us with passion and inspiration, setting us free from going any other way than seeking first the kingdom of God, always having extra oil for our lamps to welcome Jesus, the Bridegroom.

The "Bridegroom" is always calling the church to active faithfulness and commitment. Our Bridegroom is even now calling this church to share the feast, to fulfill its mission, to open wide the door of opportunity, to take the next, and deliberate step of faith, ready to light the way. Amen.