

Matthew 5:1-2, 6:19-24
Matthew 24:1-3, 25:1-13
November 6, 2011

The Sermon on the A Mount

Last week I was privileged to officiate at a very warm, peaceful and charming wedding. It was supposed to be an outdoor wedding and I always warn people about outdoor weddings.

First Video – Pool Side

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0DmtmmFEVo>

But then again any wedding can take a turn

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9tk6p3maww>

Few events in life are more emotionally weighted than weddings. In most cases the people getting married have a deep deep desire to “do it right” and there is an awful lot of investment and energy put into the outfits and choreography of the whole weekend. I often feel bad for the bride and groom because I witness the extreme pressure they are feeling. In fact there is usually so much stress on the bride and groom; that it is my custom to remind them and urge them to share responsibility with their wedding party and try to relax

and enjoy themselves. I usually say a prayer with the groomsmen and then the women just before the service. My hope is that the prayer helps a little.

Frankly most families spend too much money and place way too much emphasis on the two days of the wedding weekend. For some reason we feel a societal pressure. Ironically enough, many young couples view the whole idea of preparing for the life long institution of marriage with premarital counseling as an annoyance. Really folks, the color of the gowns of the bridesmaids will have little or no effect on the long term happiness of the couple. The fact that a marriage ceremony is a worship service often barely registers. Most of us are so worried about what aunt Tilley thinks, it hardly crosses our mind that God is our witness.

Its pretty interesting that just a few days before the end of his life, Jesus chooses a wedding as the setting for a parable about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of heaven will be like this: ten Bridesmaids took their lamps. Weddings were probably just as full of freight then as they are now. In this parable, for whatever reason; the groom does not show up on time. Five bridesmaids are labeled foolish because they did not bring extra oil. Their lamps go dim.

What this means is that the all important nighttime processional from the bride's house to the place of the ceremony and reception will not be as bright as and as festive as it should be. This processional was a key moment in the ancient Jewish wedding.

Most people argue that this parable is an allegory about the coming Kingdom of God and that Jesus is the Groom for whom we are waiting. But some people go a bit farther and claim the five foolish bridesmaids represent the people who won't make it into heaven. That interpretation is both harsh and illogical. Even the foolish bridesmaids were faithfully waiting for the groom. They were dressed in their wedding finery just like the other bridesmaids. They were family. They were faithful and none of the bridesmaids knew when the groom was coming.. Some are prepared and some are not but they are all in the wedding party. So this is a parable not about insiders and outsiders but a parable about insiders. This is a parable about the church. Some in the church are prepared and some in the church are not prepared. When Jesus comes he is looking for everyone in the church to be prepared.

The point here is to live life expectant and hopeful. Christian hope rests on the trust that God who created the world will continue

to love the world with gentle providence, will continue the process of creation until the project is complete and will continue to redeem and save the world by coming into it again and again with the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Christ will come again and we are being urged to roll up our sleeves and work for God's dream that is always breaking into history.¹

Part of rolling up our sleeves and being ready for Christ is to participate in Extravagant Generosity. Generous Stewardship helps to make God's vision a reality. Robert Schnase the Methodist Bishop who wrote our devotional booklet called Practicing Extravagant Generosity writes this on Wednesday of the last week of reading...

"Americans Live in an extraordinarily materialist and consumerist society. We are immersed in a culture that feeds acquisitiveness, the appetite for more and bigger, and that fosters the myth that self worth is found in material wealth and that happiness comes by possessing. Thirty year olds feel like failures because they don't already have the kind of house that their parents own. Couples struggle under oppressive levels of debt that strain marriages, destroy happiness, and intensify conflict and anxiety. As one radio

¹ John Buchanan in Feasting on the Word

show host says, “we buy things we don’t need with money we don’t even have to impress people we don’t even know (the Dave Ramsey Show) .”² End of quote.

This pressure is felt by couples from day one which is the wedding day. Who are we trying to impress? One Father I knew told his daughter twenty five years ago, look I have saved \$10,000 for your wedding. I recommend you plan a modest wedding and use the rest of the cash for the down payment on your house. She was a wise bride and planned a wonderful wedding which cost under \$4000 and had \$6000 for the house. In that year \$6000 was a ten percent down payment on a townhome.

Schnase continues, “At root, these are spiritual problems not merely financial planning issues. They reveal belief systems that are spiritually corrosive and that lead to continuing discontent, discouragement and unhappiness. We can never earn enough to be happy when we believe that satisfaction, self-definition, and meaning derive principally from our possessions, and we can never trust our sense of self worth when it rests on treasures that are material and temporal.at some point, followers of Jesus must decide

² Practicing Extravagant Generosity, Daily Readings on the Grace of Giving by Bishop Robert Schnase Abingdon press Nashville Tennessee, 2011 page 78.

whether they will listen to the wisdom of the world or to the wisdom of God.”³

Jesus writes in the Sermon on the Mount “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. ...” It seems like Bishop Schnase’s words are a very good interpretation of the message of Jesus.

So the first Gospel lesson which we have shared this morning is from a section of Matthew known as the Sermon on the Mount. According to Matthew, Jesus most famous sermon was delivered to the people from a mountain. If you read Matthew carefully you will note that most important events and teachings in the life of Jesus take place on mountains. The Parable of the bridesmaids for instance is shared exclusively with the twelve disciples as they sit with Jesus on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Some scholars say that Matthew emphasized events on mountains because he viewed Jesus as the new and definitely improved Moses. Just as Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mt Sinai, Jesus reinterpreted Mosaic Law from places of higher altitude. So Jesus shares two

³ ibid

sermons from a mount and I am here this morning to share the sermon on the amount.

You know a lot of pastors dread the stewardship sermon. I daresay all that dread may lead to dread in the congregation as well. It's true that stewardship is a tender subject for many people; money in particular is an intimate topic. Much as we chase it in this culture, you think we might have an easier time talking about it; but for bad or worse so much of our self worth is all wrapped up in it; we get tense on the subject. Bishop Schnase says for worse; too much anxiety on the whole subject of money. In terms of sermons, I would rather inspire and encourage people than piss them off and when you walk into stewardship land, tender as people are, its probably easier to anger than it is to inspire. Despite all that, I have to confess, I kind of like stewardship season. Maybe part of the reason I like stewardship is because for twenty years I never have felt that our Session has made a frivolous request of the congregation. Each and every year, our stewardship appeal has been based on real needs for solid ministry plans.

This year the biggest change the Session puts before you is the request for additional administrative staff in the area of

communication, information and connections. In the last few years you have realized some long standing goals in terms of size of congregation and program and one half time person in the office is not enough to support 275 members 150 children and youth, two pastors and two music directors. We are significantly understaffed and often stressed in our office and The Session would like to add another half time person. I wholeheartedly concur with this proposal as I feel we are being held back.

In addition we would like to continue the trend we began last year of taking significant steps toward adequately funding the Worship, Education, Discipleship and Deacons Ministries because they make a real difference in our community. I guess for me the most moving moment of this Fall was to hear from our Godly Play teachers, that is our 9:30 second and third grade class, that the students have in moments of inspiration referred to that class as their “prayer place” and that “it feels like home.” I also have heard that a second grader who attends worship at 11:00 has insisted that their family switch services so she can be in Godly Play. It was a \$4000 plus investment to get that classroom and our teachers ready but could you do \$12,000 this year for three more classes? - Because

this is the spiritual formation for which we are looking. There are more details in the Stewardship Letter that was sent to the home of members on Friday.

A sixteen percent increase in our giving would about cover us this Fall and that may sound like a lot but it would actually be less than one half percent of our combined household incomes. And so I will issue the call that the church has held up as its standard for the last several years. If your family is not yet tithing or if you realize that you have way more than enough creature comforts in your life (and most of us do) ; please pray about raising your pledge by 1% of household income. That's the sermon on the amount.

Now comes the Harundale Challenge. Even though the Bridegroom in the story was delayed; will you please not delay turning in your pledge card? Next Sunday is Pledge Dedication Sunday at Ark and Dove and Consecration Luncheon Sunday at Harundale Presbyterian Church our sister congregation. We have said to our sisters and brothers that we will get a higher percentage of pledge cards turned in next Sunday than they will. We will in worship next week lay our pledge cards on the Communion Table. They will consecrate theirs after worship. The church that gets the highest

percentage of pledges on the first day gets served a pastry and goody breakfast at an upcoming coffee hour by the other congregation. Not only is this a friendly church competition worth bragging rights at the monthly clergy breakfast but it's a family feud. There are Schafers on both Sessions. David Schafer is on our Session and His Mom sits on the Session at Harundale.

So if you already know you will be traveling next Sunday, please talk about and pray about that pledge today and pop it in tomorrow's mail.

So where is the Bride in this allegorical story? No one ever mentions a bride. How can you have a wedding without the bride? We are the bride. The church is the bride. Our Stewardship of Time Talents and Treasure are what we bring to the wedding and the marriage.

