Matthew 25:1-13 Bill Uetricht 11.08.26 Pentecost 24

As I age and now as I think about what retirement might mean, I find myself reflecting on life, its rhythms, its purpose, my involvement in it, my approach to it. Something I've noted lately about myself, something that I am not so proud of, is that I tend always to be in preparatory mode. I always seem to be doing something that is a matter of preparing me for the next thing. The next thing is always on my mind. This current thing is preparing me for that next thing which then is preparing me for the thing after that. I have always been a person who wants to be prepared for the next thing. I tend not to be a procrastinator, wanting to be ready for what is coming up. Even though I am very capable of being spontaneous, I like to be prepared. I want to be ready.

You'd think then that I would really resonate with our theme for today, "Getting ready." And I do. You'd think that Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready," our special music for today, would be one of my favorite songs. It is. "People, get ready; there's a train a comin'." I love the song. A train is coming, and you won't get on it, if you aren't ready for it. You will miss it.

People, get ready. It's a good theme. But as I deal with myself, I wonder if I don't need to nuance this theme a bit? So, think with me as I roam around a bit, as I wonder what it means to get ready and also as I ponder what we are getting ready for.

Our first reading from Amos has us getting ready for "the day of the Lord." Amos was the first prophet in the Old Testament to focus on the day of the Lord. Probably this day was a part of the Holy War tradition in Israel (not the best tradition, frankly) in which the day of the Lord was thought to be the day when God would make things

right, when God would finally take care of the enemies. This day was obviously viewed positively. People couldn't wait for the day of the Lord when the enemies would be crushed.

Well, Amos today says, "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!" The word "woe" has grieving connotations. How sad for you who wait for the day of the Lord, for it will be a day not of light, but of darkness. It will be as if someone fled from a lion only to be met by a bear. What you are waiting for is not something good, Amos is saying. The day of the Lord is going to be a day of reckoning. It's not something to look forward to. Prepare for the day when God's justice will roll down like water and God's righteousness will surge like an ever-flowing stream.

Well, if this is what we are getting ready for, then how do you prepare for that? It's a favorite question among certain kinds of Christians who always feel like we are getting ready for God to zap us, to send us off to hell, or to take us out back and spank us. I know that this is not what we are getting ready for, but I do wonder if our getting ready doesn't involve preparation for a little refining work to be done on us and on our culture. How do we get ready for such purifying work? Is it a matter of looking busy because Jesus is coming, a matter of getting the house clean or behaving properly, stopping our dirty jokes or our bad language? That just doesn't do it for me.

Our gospel reading has a different perspective on what we are getting ready for. I suspect that Matthew's take is a little bit like Amos', in that we are getting ready for God, the day of God's coming. But in Matthew, the day of the Lord is the day of a wedding. People are getting ready for a wedding. Ten young women who were to meet

the bridegroom to lead him with a procession of light in the midst of darkness are waiting, readying or not readying themselves for the bridegroom and the party that is about to ensue. It's a party that we are getting ready for. The day of the Lord is a party.

Well, so says the story, not everybody's ready for the party. Five of the young women didn't bring enough oil to deal with the delay of the bridegroom. The bridegroom doesn't show up on time. Who knows why? Maybe he is one of those men who wouldn't stop to ask directions. Maybe he had to do a little more negotiation with his bride's father before the deal was sealed. Who knows for sure? But we do know this. He's late, and five of the women didn't plan ahead, neglecting to bring enough oil to prepare for the delay. So, these five women have to head out to Meijer's at midnight to buy some oil. While they are shopping, the bridegroom appears, and they are not there. They then miss the procession and also the wedding and the party that follows. What's coming is a celebration, and these five young women miss out on the fun.

I get it. What's coming requires preparation. The future often doesn't happen or more poignantly, can be missed because we aren't ready for it. But what does that mean? What does it mean to be prepared for the day of the Lord, for the great wedding feast? Does it mean that you need to dot all the I's and cross all the T's? Does it mean that you really need to get your act together, correcting all your faults and answering all your questions? Does it mean that you make preparation the end-all-be-all? After all, you can't take a trip without making sure that all the details are managed. After all, the party, the worship service, the concert, the sporting event won't

be all that it can be, if we aren't ready for it. Make sure you have the oil, for heaven's sake.

Sometimes I am afraid we make preparation an obsession, causing us to miss out on what truly is happening right now and what could happen in the future. Sometimes our obsession can mean that we miss out on living. I don't know, but this is what I wonder. Is the best preparation not a matter of obsessing about securing the future, but a matter of deep attention to what is occurring now? Perhaps to get ready for the day of the Lord is not about managing all of your moral or religious details, but to open yourself up to the God whose day is always at hand, whose day always seeks to refine us, to call us individually and as a nation to a deeper care for one another, especially for the vulnerable among us.

Perhaps to get ready for the great wedding feast is not to obsess about what is going to happen in the future, but to come to grips with what is happening in the now, to see, experience, and participate in the party that life is now. Perhaps we can be so busy preparing for what will happen in the future that we miss out on what is happening now. Maybe having enough oil for the night is not an invitation to a long list of things that need to be done before you move on to or arrive at *the next*. Maybe having enough oil is a matter of seeing life differently, of opening your minds and hearts to the work of the Spirit of God in this moment.

Oil in the Christian tradition is often associated with the work of the Spirit, and the work of the Spirit is often associated with wisdom. "Open the eyes of my heart, open the eyes of my heart. I want to see you." I want the wisdom that is not putting life off until

tomorrow, but seeing God in the moment, encountering the comfort of God and the demand of God *now*.

I am not telling you not to get ready for things. Honestly, I will still be perturbed with my clergy friends who wait to the last minute to get their sermons done, who don't show up early to get ready for whatever is happening in their church life. But this I know. I miss out on too much because I am too preoccupied with preparing for the next thing. I miss out on the glory of a conversation with a person because I am thinking that I should be preparing for a conversation with the next person. The day of the Lord is now. The wedding feast is occurring now. Grace, love, and expectation are the gifts of the present moment. It's a matter of urgency that we get ready for these gifts, that we open our eyes to what Eckhart Tolle calls the power of NOW!