

Intending to Be Ready

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 25:1-13 on Sunday, November 12, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem

I.

If you are a music major in any college or university, the classic rite of passage as a junior or senior is the preparation of your recital. This is a time for you to draw together music that you have loved and learned, practice diligently to master it, and then share it in a performance with your friends, family, and colleagues. And if you are a music major like me, you'd begin mapping out every element of your recital on day one, imagining what songs and arias you'd sing, what fabulous dress you'd wear, even down to what appetizers to serve at the reception.

As the time of my senior recital drew closer, I had selected a lush yet wickedly challenging set of French art songs by Claude Debussy, ones that took a while to sink into my memory. I remember rehearsing these for weeks with my teachers, and even as they began to press me to trust my memorization and move off the page, I kept looking at the words and the music. "I'll memorize it later," I would say to myself... that is until 'later' arrived, and with the programs printed, the fabulous dress bought, and the appetizers ordered, I found myself resorting to rote memorization techniques to get it done in the eleventh hour.

Thankfully, I didn't make a total fool out of myself and even enjoyed it in the process! But as I reflected on the last-minute memory-cramming, it helped me to learn a lesson in readiness. You see, I assumed that along the way, the memorization would just... come! I figured that as much as I was working on it, I was bound to have some of that song set memorized! I intended to have it all done! But I learned that without focused, careful

attention – attention directed and held and sustained – the memorization was just an intention.

II.

Today we begin a three-week stretch of parables from Matthew 25, which give us a window into the shade of the meaning of the word ‘tending,’ that is, ‘intending.’ Where you might remember that “tending” means both to hold, nurture, or care, or to stretch or reach toward, “intending” means... well, *to mean!* To “have as a plan, have in mind or purpose.” To “direct one's attention to, pay attention, give heed.”¹ Like saying, I *meant* to only buy the items on my list at Target; I *have a plan* to not get into a fight with my kid; I *have in mind* that I’ll put up my Christmas decorations this weekend; I’m *directing my attention* to that stack of notes to write. (These are all hypothetical situations, you understand.) I intend to do this, I intend to do that.

These parables give us space to consider what “tending” looks like when focused on a specific outcome or task. And today, we wonder about “intending to be ready.”

Readiness is on Jesus’ mind in today’s parable, one of three in a row here in Matthew 25 that scholars call the “advent parables,” in part because they sound the Advent themes of waiting and preparation for the final coming of Jesus to bring God’s kingdom to its ultimate conclusion. We’re nearing the end of Jesus’ life, you remember, and after all the quarrels with the Temple’s religious leaders had ended, we see Jesus, alone with his disciples from atop the Mount of Olives sharing a vision of the end in a series

¹ These notes from the Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/intend>.

of instructions and stories that point to the coming apocalypse. “But about that day and hour,” Jesus tells his disciples, “no one knows.”

Let me remind us again of the purposes of parables, of these short, startling stories that are intended (!) to disrupt and perplex. For here, Jesus offers a few parables, intended (there’s that word again!) to move the disciples’ energies from detecting *when* the end will come to preparing instead for the wait.²

Ten bridesmaids are the subject of this short story, found only in the Gospel of Matthew – five bridesmaids who are foolish, and five who are wise. They’re at a wedding party, waiting for the groom to arrive as they light the way into the party. Those wise bridesmaids have come prepared: Girl Scouts in training, classic responsible older children, the 1s and 6s on the Enneagram who thought this whole scenario through six months ago, their oil refills at the ready to keep their lamps trimmed and burning. Yet the foolish five weren’t ready. You know them: the ones that procrastinate and scramble the night before, the ones who’ve been told their whole life “if you were just responsible for once, maybe this would be easier!” They were there with their lamps, but forgot the backup oil, and couldn’t convince their wise counterparts to share. (There’s never enough, you see! “You should have thought about that!”) Wouldn’t you know it, the precise moment they run out to a 24-hour Walgreens to pick some up, the bridegroom arrives and takes the responsible half into the party! But when the foolish five arrive and ask to come in, the bridegroom responds: “truly I tell you, I don’t even know you.” “Keep awake,” Jesus concludes to the disciples, “for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

² Anna Carter Florence, *Matthew: Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p274.

I trust you can hear in this parable all the nuances intended to disturb and provoke us. Are constantly-burning lamps required to be let into a party? And not having enough oil or being late to the party are such grave offenses that they warrant being kicked out indefinitely? Why is the groom so woefully delayed?³ And where, pray tell, is the other partner we're waiting for? Why didn't the wise half share their oil, or at least wait for the rest of their friends before going into the feast? Jesus, remember that all ten fell asleep while they were waiting! So why do you say to keep awake?

III.

This is one of those parables that seems more frustrating than helpful upon first glance. We wonder, what is there to learn from this? How neatly can we allegorize these roles and items? What is the proverbial "back up oil" we're supposed to have? If Jesus is the bridegroom, and we are the bridesmaids, what are we to do to keep those lamps trimmed and burning? Yet if we can move past the surface, past right and wrong in the landscape of lamps and oil, and take a deeper look at what it's asking us to consider, I see lessons here about readiness, and even two particular pitfalls to avoid.

The first of those pitfalls is that we tie readiness to perceived abundance in preparation. I'll be ready when I have ample time to get things done, we tell ourselves. I'll be ready when I have ample money to buy what I need, or ample savings to be calm in retirement, or ample knowledge to be able to tackle that project, or ample training to really become a runner, or ample charm or humor or interest to be able to make this relationship work. I wonder if this is what drives survivalists and hypochondriacs in their daily life – endless doomsday scenarios to prepare for! – and keeps many from

³ Thanks to AJL for the phrase "woefully delayed groom", Short Stories by Jesus, p302.

summoning the vulnerability to try the new thing or trust the relationship. If we could just get the circumstances right, the list checked off, the resources assembled, *then* we could really do it.

But you know as well as I do that the goalposts seem to always move! Isn't there always another 'what if' that jumps in our mind? Isn't there always another thing to do, another thing to get, another thing to be in order to *really* be ready? How do we know and how can we trust that one back-up container of lamp oil is enough, metaphorically and literally? What if we need two – or ten? What if we need more wicks or more light in general? What if, what if, what if... there's just never enough!

Yet let's be honest with ourselves: do we ever *truly* have enough to do the thing? If we waited until we were fully ready and fully prepared to enjoy that vacation, take a risk on that relationship, have that baby, accept that promotion, stop doing the thing we've always done, we might convince ourselves that there's always more to do to be ready, and never actually do the thing in the first place!

Zack, we'll ordain you this afternoon, and as ready as you are for ordination, I know you know there's no way you could prepare for all that ministry holds. Thank God you're not waiting to do so!

So the danger is not just that we won't ever perceive that we're prepared for every possible scenario of the years ahead. Rather, the danger is also that we start expecting so much sameness that it lulls us right to sleep. "My spouse never changes their behavior," we tell ourselves, "so why even ask for something different? These politicians never do anything about my concerns, so why even bother sending emails and making phone calls? The higher ups at my job never notice my hard work, so why even work harder? I

just keep making the same mistakes over and over again, with the same excuses and tired arguments, so why even try to change? This ain't my first rodeo! I know what's going to happen." It's like living next to an airport so you get used to the noise of planes and expect, or dealing with chronic pain so you forget what comfort feels like. Sameness desensitizes us. We begin expecting it. We doubt that any change, however meaningful, is ever possible. Yeah, I intended to do something different, but what's even the point?

With these two pitfalls in mind, I'd like us to consider today that **the ready life is the readying life**, that in order to truly be ready, we must be readying, day in and day out. "But about that day and hour, no one knows," Jesus tells us. In life, there's not some ultimate finish line or checklist to end all checklists that, once completed, makes us truly feel ready for the living. Rather, ready is readying! It's living every day readying for what's to come: not putting off the memorizing, but doing it! Not waiting to make things right in that relationship that challenges you, but working on it! Not spinning your wheels on assembling the best life first aid kit with all that you can store up here on earth, but using it! Not sinking into the despair of sameness and assuming nothing will ever change, but rather practicing hope, peace, joy, and love right in your little life and trusting that it matters to God and that it matters in the landscape of time!

Nothing changes if nothing changes, right? So let's gently lay down the oil we're hoarding or the oil we're chasing and ready ourselves for God by doing the readying work of today. Let's do as Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, and "live a caught-up life, not a put-off life, so that wherever you are — standing in a field or grinding at the mill, or just going about the everyday business of your life — you are ready for God, for whatever happens next, not

afraid but wide awake, watching for the Lord who never tires of coming to the world.”⁴

IV.

This week, we lost a friend, one of our saints, Fran Stewart. Just the day before she died, she was on the phone with some of you, offering prayers on the prayer call from her hospital bed, telling stories to the nurses about her neighbors, sitting with Amy talking about the shape of her life. Fran’s death was so sudden, that I have looked up the back door a half a dozen times already this morning, assuming she’d come walking in a little late like usual, hug me at the door after worship with an encouraging word, then ask me to print something for her because she can’t pull it up on her iPad!

Fran was one of God’s best at living a caught-up life. Not a day passed that she didn’t shower her love, fully and freely, to those in her life. Not a church gathering passed that she didn’t bring her full self to its engagement: not a Deacons meeting, not a church conference, not a fellowship meal, not a worship service. Not a single Sunday blazer in her closet that she didn’t adorn with her First Baptist on Fifth button. Not a single friend or neighbor that she didn’t serve generously with her handwritten notes, her gentle artwork, her ceaseless encouragement.

Not a one of us among the many who knew and loved Fran was ready for her departure. Yet Fran was ready to meet Jesus, not because she couldn’t bear this life, but because she lived a readying life! When the day and hour of her departure arrived, nothing had been held back. Nothing was missed. There was no relationship left untended, no encouragement left unsaid, no corner of life left unlived. Would that we all do the same!

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, p113.

The ready life is the readying life, where intentions become practices, and practices become a way of life, and the way of life becomes... life. So keep awake, friends. Be ready, for we know not the day or the hour. Amen!