

MORRISON UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
STEWARDSHIP CAMPAIGN MESSAGE: "HOPE, THE ETERNAL LIGHT"
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MATTHEW 25:1-13 & 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18
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There's something very special about a wedding. Two people who love each other publicly committing themselves to the other before family, friends, and God ... they pledge themselves one to the other. There's an extraordinary sense of excitement. A new life is beginning born from two individual lives.

Our Gospel passage today is about a wedding and what happens at that wedding celebration.

Matthew 25, the chapter in which we find today's Gospel reading, ends the fifth major section of Jesus' teaching. If you recall, Matthew is modelled on the Jewish Pentateuch, (the first five books of the Old Testament), which tradition tells us / is authored by Moses. Matthew views Jesus as the New Moses.

More significantly, Matthew 25 is quite interesting because it represents the final teaching of Jesus on earth. Jesus did not have to possess superhuman knowledge to realize Jerusalem's leaders are going to make him pay for challenging their authority and doing so to their faces and in their own city and in their sacred Temple.

At the beginning of Chapter 26, Jesus says, "After two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."

So, what are the final teachings of Jesus before his demise?

We find this rather strange story about the ten bridesmaids (in older translations it's translated "maidens" or "virgins," which you may be more used to—the Greek word is "parthenos," which is the Greek word for "virgin." The Greek Parthenon is dedicated to the virgin goddess Athena, the patron goddess of Athens).

It is translated "bridesmaids" here to represent their role in the story.

Note, too, that Jesus (as he does elsewhere) uses this story to describe the Kingdom of God ... "The kingdom of heaven will be like this ..."

What will it be like?

"Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom." Why on earth would bridesmaids be carrying lamps?

The custom of the day (and you can still find this in certain Middle Eastern cultures) is that weddings were held toward evening and lamps (or torches) were used as part of the celebration, which focused on a procession leading the bride to the groom's house.

The bridesmaids leave the bride, with whom they have been staying, and go out with their lamps to meet the bridegroom. Then, they escort him back to the bride, whom they all (in turn) escort to the home of the groom's father for a big feast.

We are told five of the bridesmaids are foolish and five are wise. The foolish ones took no oil with them; the wise ones took flasks of oil for their lamps.

The lamps would not burn indefinitely. When they run out of oil, they have to be refilled.

The bridegroom is delayed, which means the bridesmaids may not have enough oil if they did not prepare for a delay ... and delays were a common occurrence.

Is this a big deal?

Yes! It was an honor to be chosen as a bridesmaid ... and the traditions of the wedding celebration had to be followed. If something went awry, it spoke badly not only of the bridesmaid but also of the bride, who chose her, and the bride's family. And you don't want that to happen ... especially in front of your new in-laws.

This groom is so late that the bridesmaids become drowsy and they all fall asleep.

At midnight, there was a shout ... "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all the bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps.

The foolish ones want the wise bridesmaids to share their oil.

But the wise ones say, "No way! There will not be enough for you and for us ... you had better go buy some for yourselves." So the Foolish Five head out the Jerusalem Menard's.

While they're gone, the groom comes ... but there are only five bridesmaids. This is embarrassing.

The bridal party (minus the five fools) goes to the wedding banquet ... but the door is shut. During wedding celebrations, people would come and go ... but at this one / late guests are not allowed in.

The Foolish Five finally get their oil and show up. "Hey, open the door ... it's us." The groom responds, "Who are you? You can't be my bride's friends ... they would have been prepared and shown up on time on the most important day of her life." (Of course, he doesn't mention that he was really late.)

At the end of this story, Jesus says, "Keep awake ... for you know neither the day nor the hour."

"Neither the day nor the hour" of what?

Throughout this fifth section of Jesus' teaching, Jesus is teaching about his return and the coming fulfilled kingdom of God. We know this because he says "the kingdom of heaven will be like this." Not the way it is in Jesus' day, but how it will be.

And, Jesus says, "Keep awake ... for you know neither the day nor the hour." That is better understood as "Be prepared!"

That fits the context because all of the bridesmaids fall asleep waiting for the groom ... not just the Foolish ones. But, it is the foolish ones who are not prepared for unforeseen circumstances. That is, they are not focused on their primary responsibility ... make the bride's day great by doing what their supposed to do ... taking their responsibility seriously ... being focused ... having the appropriate mindset and perspective.

What does it mean to be "prepared for the return of Christ and the fulfilled Kingdom of God"? What is our responsibility in that regard?

It means that you are moving forward in your journey of discipleship, yes ... BUT, more basically, it means living each day with an eternal perspective ... living in the light of our Great Hope of the Coming of God's Realm ... a kingdom ruled by love, peace, and justice.

We must ask ourselves, then, "In light of that, what has real meaning in our lives? What matters to you?"

When I am stressed-out about something ... when everything seems to go wrong ... I try to pause and regain an eternal perspective ... focus on the Hope of God's everlasting Kingdom of Light.

That is, I try to look forward to the time when we will be in God's presence ... when evil will be squelched ... when there will be no war ... no conflict ... no tension ... no bad relationships ... no abuse ... no regrets ... no illness ... no pain no pandemics. Whatever I am struggling with / then loses its grip on me.

We do not live in a culture of love, peace and justice, do we? Where's the groom? Shouldn't Jesus have come back by now? It is hard dealing with that delay.

But, we can address such things by being prepared ... looking forward ... looking to the hope that is ahead ... the kingdom that has been promised.

It helps a great deal to have an eternal perspective and to live in the Hope of God's promised future as our Stewardship Sunday approaches.

Recently, I preached a message on the two things that we're not supposed to talk about in polite company—politics and religion. If there is a third topic that is off-limits, it's money. I try to not emphasize money in my messages, but we have to talk about the finances of the church.

Some congregations have sophisticated stewardship campaigns. They have their place. I prefer to keep things simple. And that is grounded in your knowing what you have here at Morrison United Methodist Church. The way you are a Church Family ... reaching out and supporting one another, embracing one another (from as safe distance, of course) ... caring for one another ... praying for one another ... loving one another.

I have witnessed this here. I recall this summer so a number of you got in your cars and paraded past the Humphrey's home to help Torry celebrate her birthday. Remember gathering together in the school parking lot? That lot was full. And it was so much fun ... so moving ... seeing Torry's face light up with her big smile as all the cars drove by honking their horns and decked out with posters and balloons.

I saw it most recently as so many of you came out for Mike Olson's vigil—it was raining, it was cold, the coronavirus was on everyone's mind. Yet, you came out to lift-up Charla and the family and one another over losing a very dear man far too soon.

That kind of thing gives us a glimpse of the Fulfilled Kingdom of God.

When you give financially to this church:

You are supporting the proclamation of the message of Hope (the Sure and Certain Hope) that can be found only in Jesus Christ.

You are shining your lamps, anticipating the Return of the Lord.

You are driving forward the ministries of this body of believers—reaching out to one another and to those in our community.

You are investing in eternal things, which produce eternal rewards in an Eternal Realm.

You know the wonderful blessings that this church brings ... and you support the church financially ... you have done that for years ... and you are very generous.

We are facing exceptional challenges this year ... thousands of dollars behind in our giving. And, in all likelihood, the pandemic situation we face now will continue into next year.

The church needs your financial support. By pledging, you help us prepare for the year. There's a great advantage in knowing what the members of the church are planning to give. It's as simple as that.

—If you pledge each year, thank you.

—If you contribute regularly without pledging, thank you for that.

—If you have not pledged previously, please consider doing so for 20-21

—If you can increase your pledge or giving next year, that would be very helpful. (Not everyone can ... we understand that.)

I have been tithing at least 10-percent of my gross salary for several years now, and I have been doing that here since I arrived in July. I say that / only to let you know I, too, am invested in Morrison United Methodist Church. I cannot preach about such things without practicing them. I can tell you honestly that since I began tithing I have received incredible blessings—not financial blessings, but rewarding experiences filled with deep joy. There is joy in giving.

I know that not everyone will tithe to this church, but I do and will continue to do so. I am in this with you.

Look for my letter in the mail this week, which goes into more detail about Stewardship and pledging. Please complete the enclosed orange Commitment Card ... and return it to the office—drop it off or mail it in. Please make sure it arrives by Tuesday, November 17th. We will gather the cards in a basket and place them here in the Chancel area.

Our theme for this Stewardship Campaign is “Hope, The Eternal Light.” There is an image of an ancient lamp on the Commitment Card, similar to the ones the bridesmaids probably used.

My friends, we are People of the Light! Jesus says, “I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

And, Jesus commands us to be “lights”: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

In Scripture, Light is a symbol of Hope. We see this in our Gospel passage. The light from the lamps celebrates the Hope created by a wedding for the couple getting married.

But, Jesus is also talking about Hope generated by his being the Light of the World because in his work on the Cross he reconciled us to God and made it possible to come back into fellowship with our Creator, moving from darkness to light. And he is coming back to establish his Eternal Fulfilled Kingdom. That is the Good News, and that is our Great Hope! It is not wishful thinking; it is God's *promise* to us!

Be prepared for Jesus' Return. Shine light in the darkness. Look beyond the here and now and focus on Eternity. Invest in Hope—Sure and Certain Hope.

Amen.