

The Rev. Eric O. Springsted, Ph.D.
Rye Presbyterian Church
November 6, 2011

What Are We Waiting For?

Text: St. Matthew 25:1-13

If one had no preconceptions about the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, if one heard it for the first time and didn't know anything about the teller of the story, and if one were only told that one group of girls was wise and the other foolish, but not which is which, it might be very hard for any of us right now to determine which of the two groups was wise and which was foolish. In fact, we might well pick out the wise and the foolish in a very different way than the original teller of the story did.

Why? Because, if the difference between the two is simply that one set of girls waited and saved the oil for their lamps for later, and the other set burned theirs early on as they were moved to do so, then it is not at all clear which is the wiser alternative. To our minds, it is not clear at all whether we should seize the day, or if we should be patient, carefully stewarding our resources, and wait for later, even much later. There is a lot around us that suggests, no, *demand*s, that we not wait.

To be fair, that is not an entirely foolish suggestion. Consider here that it certainly seems to be the case that *not* saving your resources and waiting is the truly wise choice in many, many instances. Take the simple and even trivial example. How many of us have bought or received something really special – a favorite delicacy, a bottle of rare and expensive wine, a knock 'em dead dress or tie – and saved it for a special occasion? And how often has it been that no occasion has ever been special enough to bring it out? And, of course, the longer one holds onto such an item in order to use it at a later, special occasion, the more special the occasion needs to be, and

thus the likelihood of ever using it soon diminishes to zero. So, we never use it and it is wasted.

Thus, whenever we hold on tightly to our resources, our special resources, it may well be argued that we never live. In such cases, waiting and watching for what is to come means putting off life until it is too late. Of course, when one puts it this way, we realize it is more than food and drink or dresses and ties that is at stake. We hold onto to a lot more than special items for consumption. We hold onto to big hopes, we hold onto great anticipations, and we hold onto the past, both good and bad, memories and resentments. Often when we do so, that act of holding on frustrates us. In such cases, our big problem is that we seem to put off life itself. Or, at least, we worry a lot about it.

Perhaps some of you will remember the movie of a few years ago, *Sideways*. The movie was famous chiefly for three things: its stunning scenic shots of the Sonoma Valley, its celebration of fine wine, and, consequently, the line delivered by one of its characters: "I'm leaving if they order merlot!" But, of course, there was a lot more to it than that. It is the story of two old college friends, Jack and Miles, who go off for some serious wine tasting and golf in the Sonoma Valley just before Jack's upcoming marriage. Yet, as the movie proceeds it seems that morally the roles are reversed. Jack, who is about to get married, is very effectively chasing a number of women he meets, while Miles, who has been divorced a couple of years already, seems to be saving himself for his wife – his ex-wife. The problem is he just can't get over the divorce even though it happened some years before and his ex-wife has remarried.. He is depressed and depressing. Even when a very smart and attractive woman shows a real interest in him, he holds back, and pretty much throws a wet towel over the relation.

Now, a key theme in the movie is wine. A lot of wine gets drunk and even more gets discussed. Miles knows a lot about wine, and while he can't afford much of a collection of old and

rare bottles, he does own a bottle of 1961 Cheval Blanc, a wine that goes for thousands at auction. But, of course, he is saving it, although it not clear what he is saving it for. Still stuck on his wife, who has since remarried, it may be that he is saving it for some kind of reunion. Since he isn't able to form new relations, it wouldn't seem to be for the birth of his first son.

At Jack's wedding, Miles meets his former wife face to face. In the past, he has mainly talked to her when drinking too much, and when he has become thoroughly morose – drinking and dialing as Jack calls it. It is a discussion that brings home to him the fact that there will never be a reconciliation, since she shares with him the good news that she and her new husband are expecting a child – and the advice that he needs to start living.

Given everything we know about Miles, we would think that this would send him over the edge. And it does, to a degree. He, of course, refuses to go to the wedding reception. Instead, we next see him sitting in a McDonald's eating a Big Mac. And he, who drinks too much in an effort to obliterate his pain, is secretively pouring a bottle of wine, hidden in a bag, into a Mickey D's cup. But then we see that there is something strange here; the wine he is pouring is the bottle of 1961 Cheval Blanc.

Something has happened to Miles. As we soon discover, it is actually something good for once. In hitting a self-induced emotional rock bottom, he finally has let go and made himself into a real, live, emotionally available person, for the next scene has him driving back to Sonoma to take a risk and to start a relation with the woman he met there, the one person who was really interested in his unpublished novel that nobody else wanted to read, the one person who seemed interested in him for himself but whom he had held at arm's length before.

So, the message here is that in order to live, we have to let go. We can't keep saving ourselves for something that may never happen. We especially can't keep saving the past and

holding onto it. Indeed, the only way, it seems, that we can live life fully is if we don't hold back, and if we can let go – let go particularly of all the old baggage that is holding us back and weighing us down.

Now, if that were true absolutely then it would certainly seem to be the case that the girls who burned their oil early, and who didn't hold on to it, should be deemed the wise ones. They are the ones who stand for those who have seized the day. But as we all well know, we know it because we just read the story, these are not the girls that Jesus calls the wise ones. It is the ones who saved their oil. Why?

Well, not because Jesus thought that one should never let go of the past. After all, he called for conversion, and conversion is at its root, a matter of letting go of the past and changing one's mind and heart for something better. Nor, was it because he thought we shouldn't seize the moment. After all, he complained about the Pharisees who when it was announced that the kingdom of God was among them, were unresponsive to all that called for. As Jesus complained of his generation, they were like children who refused to play, for "We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we mourned and you did not wail." No, the reason he claimed that the girls who saved their oil were the wise ones was because, in the end, he knew and taught that there needs to remain something at the center of the human heart, an empty spiritual space as it were, that can only be filled by God himself. To forget that it is there, or try to fill it ourselves with what ultimately does not satisfy is something that will kill us. It will cause us to lose ourselves, and it will cause us to lose the ability to distinguish in all the rest of life between what is worth waiting for and what is not. On the other hand, to remember that that space is there and to leave that space empty, and to wait for God to fill it, that is in the end to find real life. The way that we regard that space and our willingness to wait for it to be filled by God is the mark of

distinction between the wise and the foolish.

Let me put it this in the way of a very contemporary problem. Over the last several years, if not the last several decades, there has been a great worry about the growing secularism of the western world. For scholars and people who work in public policy, this is manifested as a concern about the loss of religion in the public sphere. For theologians, it is a worry about the loss of belief and a worry about whether the Christian faith is seen as credible any longer. For church leaders, including elders, it is a worry about the loss of members, and their choices to opt for everything else but worship on Sunday morning. One contemporary philosopher, Charles Taylor, in noting all these things, however, has suggested that good part of the problem of secularism is not the loss of belief itself, –there’s plenty of belief and beliefs to go around – but the loss of a sense of anything transcendent, a sense of the loss of anything that does not belong to this world, a sense of loss of mystery, and hence a sense of a loss of our feeling that we are called to anything great. Quoting both T.S. Eliot and Oscar Wilde, he has pointed out the “flatness of modern civilization which sees ‘the final triumph of the Hollow Men, who, knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing, have lost the ability to feel or think deeply about anything.’” In this flattened world, faith, in the form of civilized religion, becomes nothing more than a form of crowd control, and God is nothing more than the divine helper for our projects.

That flat religion, however, is not the religion of the saints. It was not the religion of those men and women in the early centuries of Christianity who, having found the civilization of the Roman Empire dark and impossible and deadly to the soul, fled to the deserts of Egypt to find God and truth and light. It was not the religion of St. Augustine, who gave up the sure promise of a brilliant career in the imperial court, to become the pastor of a minor North African town. It was not the religion of a Luther, who set the world on its ear in order to set the world aright, nor the

religion of a Bonhoeffer who resisted the evils of Nazism at the cost of his life, nor the religion of a Dorothy Day who founded the Hospitality Houses of the Catholic Worker movement in New York City, nor the religion of Albert Schweitzer who gave up a brilliant career as a musician and scholar to found a hospital in Africa.

What is the difference between these saints, these wise ones, and the foolish girls of the parable? It was not that the saints held onto the past tightly. Surely, they did not hold onto the past tightly; all of them experienced significant conversions that changed their lives completely. The difference was that deep within them was a sense that there remains at the center of the human heart something that the world cannot satisfy, that there is a space at our center that only God can fill if we are going to have fulfilled lives, and that we must wait for God to fill it. For that, for all the saints, like the wise young girls of the parable, they waited.

On All Saints' Day, we, of course, celebrate the great lives and the beloved lives of God's people who have gone before us, and those who have departed from us. But it is more than a celebratory look back over the shoulder at the past. This day and these lives also pose a great question for every single one of us today, for they pose the question of whether there is life eternal in God, or whether it is all over, all at once for us. To fail to be a saint, is simply to say that there is nothing worth waiting for, and that one should seize the day, everyday. This is not an entirely disreputable thing to do. Doing it is a way to enjoy life, surely, and perhaps even to respect it deeply. It may even mean being a good person; yet, in the end, it may well also mean not believing that we are called to anything truly great and transcendent. To be a saint, on the other hand, is to have answered in the affirmative the question that there is something great to which we are called.

What does that mean? What does it mean to say that we are called to something great and

that there is something we need to wait for? It means to hold on dearly to something that can determine all of life, and that is worth waiting for. To answer in the affirmative that there is something really worth living for, is also to live a certain way. How? Well, it involves not saving everything. If one is waiting for life in God, one should not save things like resentment or disappointment or anger. If one is waiting for life in God, and something truly great, well, that also involves changing one's life in order to live it as something great. It subsequently involves the ability to tell the difference between what is worth waiting for, and what is not. And above all, it also means being able to give of yourself, because as St. Paul once said, our very selves are hid in Christ in God. Because they are, we can give, we can be generous, we can love because we can be sure that life does not end with death, and that in giving of ourselves we are not losing anything, but are gaining an entire world.