

Our culture has a fascination with preparedness. The Boy Scouts have taught generations of young men to “Be Prepared”. We have winter driving survival checklists, hurricane survival checklists, books on how to survive every possible “Worst Case Scenario”. There are TV shows like “Doomsday Preppers,” in which people stockpile years’ worth of food and build survival bunkers in case civilization as we know it is destroyed. The White House even has an emergency plan in the event of a zombie apocalypse. In case you’re wondering, Minnesota is ranked as one of the safer places to live because of the vast amount of rural space and the high number of hardware stores. We are prepared for whatever comes our way. Well, at least in theory. Having a checklist or plan is one thing; actually following it is another.

In today’s Gospel, we have 5 bridesmaids who only brought whatever oil was already in their lamps and 5 who had the foresight to bring extra oil, just in case something happened. Of course, something did happen and only the 5 were prepared when the bridegroom arrived. The bridegroom tells the unprepared bridesmaids that he doesn’t know them and locks the door against them. It’s easy to fixate on the portrayal of Jesus as rather harsh and demanding, but this parable is the 2nd in a series of 4 that express an underlying concern about how to determine the true believers from the pretenders, especially in light of Jesus’ earlier declaration in Matthew, that “not everyone who calls me Lord will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” These parables are about God’s expectations. Each parable extols readiness. The parable of the bridesmaids focuses on the question of what it means to live in faithful readiness as we wait for Christ to return. In other words, what does it mean to live a Christian life?

Read together with the 4th parable, the Parable of the Sheep & Goats, we can see that there is a clear expectation that we serve the poor, sick, oppressed, and outcast. But there’s more. A Christian is a student of Christ who tries to follow the example that Jesus set; in other words, a disciple. A true disciple is one who talks to God daily, shares the Good News with those who need to hear it, studies the Scriptures, spends time in worship, aids others whenever possible, encourages fellow believers, and has a generosity of spirit. Generosity of spirit is often phrased as “giving”, especially of your time and money to the church. It goes way beyond that;

it's an all-encompassing compassion and sincerity. If you are giving because you've been guilted into it or you feel obligated – in fact, if you are doing any of these things without sincerity - you are missing the point of the Gospels and the message Jesus was trying to get across to us. An honest faith can't help but be shown through loving actions and service. "Preach the Gospel always; when necessary, use words." This is what's required of us. Discipleship is a lifetime journey; it doesn't happen overnight and sometimes we stumble. The beautiful thing is that God provides everything we need for this journey. When we stumble, his grace picks us up and sets us on our feet again.

Faithful readiness also applies to the church. The reality is that the church that you and I grew up in has changed and it continues to change. Take a moment to really look at the people in the pew in front of you, in the pew beside you, and in the pew in back of you. As many of you may remember, 20, 30 and even more years ago, the church was full of youth. Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, Luther League were all bursting at the seams. Look around. That entire generation is missing. That entire generation that spent their childhood here in the church no longer comes to church. They may send their kids to confirmation, but the church has otherwise lost its relevancy in their lives. This is not just happening in this congregation; it is happening in congregations all across the country. We have grown sleepy and complacent on our long watch.

Anyone who sits here and says, "It isn't my problem" or "Someone else can deal with it" or "Well, they know where the church is at, it's up to them to get here" is also missing the point of Jesus' message. Christianity does not equal passivity. Jesus did not set himself up in a synagogue and say, "If the people want to hear my message, they know where to find me." No. He met them where they were at. He brought his ministry to the prostitutes and drunks and thieves and other outcasts. He brought his ministry to the people that the church didn't have the time of day for.

Faithful readiness must be active readiness. Many of the Lutheran ministries that are thriving today are those based out of food trucks, pubs, cafes, mall storefronts, and other rented spaces. They're not thriving

because of their itinerant existence but because they are meeting the people where they are at instead of waiting for the people to wander through their doors.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we ditch this building that we've just spruced up or that we start up some worship services over at McDonald's. But if we want this church to thrive, we need to meet people where they are at. We need to take our ministry outside of the walls of this building. I loved that old sign that used to hang above the exit doors: "Servants Entrance", a reminder that we are servants and ministers to those outside of our doors. When I say "we" or "the church", I'm not referring to the pastors and bishops and so forth. I'm referring to each one of us here. We are the church and we have always been the church. It is up to each of us to share the Good News with those who aren't here. "For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them."

Psalm 70 from "Psalms Now" by Leslie Brandt

O God, may You take pleasure in setting me free
And in securing me from the enemies of my soul.
Keep them from bringing shame upon Your servant
And dishonor to Your name.

May those who sincerely seek You find genuine happiness and fulfillment,
And may they express their joy in proclamations of praise to You.
As for me, I always need Your sustaining grace.
O God, do not withhold it from me.

Amen.