

“ARE YOU READY?”

Matthew 25:1-13

Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

Several years ago a group of United Methodist pastors who wanted to raise money for missions started an organization known as “The Pedaling Parsons.” The Pedaling Parsons is open to anyone who wants to ride a bicycle with the group. Every fall this group gets pledges from sponsors, then rides 500 miles, a hundred miles a day for five days. The course is mapped out ahead of time. It is usually a loop through central Ohio or northern New York state or somewhere else in the Midwest. Every night the group arrives at a church, where the congregation has a potluck supper. Then the bicyclists tell their story about the particular mission project they are supporting. A different project is chosen each year. Enthusiasm is high. Thousands of dollars have been raised for Africa University, hunger ministries and a host of other mission projects.

When I was a District Superintendent, the group urged me to ride with them, which I did. Because my schedule would not permit a week away in September, I agreed to ride for one day. Now in order to ride a hundred miles on a bicycle in one day, you have to do some training. You need to get in shape. Believe me!

So I began. First, short rides around the neighborhood after work at night. After all, I hadn’t done any serious biking in years. Then there was a 20 mile bike trail not too far from where we lived. That went pretty well. After several practice rides, spanning several weeks, I felt that I was ready.

The big day came. I arrived at the church as the cyclists were packing up. As usual, enthusiasm was high. Now a hundred miles is quite a distance. I remember starting near Bucyrus, Ohio. We stopped for lunch south of Mansfield. When we go by that exit on Interstate 71, my legs still twinge a little! We ended up somewhere near Coshocton that night. I was exhausted, but I made it! What a feeling of accomplishment came over me! What a rush! It was terrific! And I raised a ton of money for missions besides.

The next year, the Pedaling Parsons wanted me to ride again, and I agreed. I had great memories! But that fall, I had an extremely busy schedule. Getting in shape for a 100 mile ride takes some doing, as I have already said. It takes time. Day after day I would plan to take a practice ride, but then I would get an emergency phone call, and I would end up not riding. Meetings, extra meetings, more meetings filled my schedule. The bicycle sat in the garage gathering cobwebs.

The day came for the ride. Was I ready? Of course I was. After all, I had done it last year, and even though I had hardly been on a bicycle since, I could do it again. I would not allude to anybody that I had not really conditioned for this trip. Nobody needed to know.

Rather than a sunny day like the year before, the weather was cloudy and overcast. In addition, there was a strong headwind as we started out. The wind will let up or it will not be so bad when we turn another direction, I thought. The road didn't turn, and the wind never stopped. To make matters worse, this course was not as flat as last year's. There were some hills. Going down was great. Pedaling uphill was torture. I began to fall behind the rest of the group. I pedaled harder. I got more tired. One of the pastors, a dear friend, sensed that I was struggling and stayed back with me so that I would not be riding alone. At first, when the group took rest stops, I caught up. But as the day wore on, my friend and I got further and further behind. The good news is that I made it to the destination. The bad news is that I came in more than an hour after the rest of the group.

The guys were very gracious. Nobody said an unkind word. But I was embarrassed and disappointed with myself. What I thought was going to be my little secret — that I hadn't taken the time to prepare for the ride — now was obvious to the whole group. Their District Superintendent, their leader, couldn't even keep up with the group. It was not my finest hour.

I found myself thinking about my bicycle trips when I was reading the Lectionary Gospel reading for today: the parable of the ten bridesmaids. What do these bridesmaids have to do with the Pedaling Parsons? At first glance, probably not a whole lot. Here are ten bridesmaids (and you thought you had a big wedding!), ten bridesmaids waiting for the groom to show up. (I once had a groom that never showed up, but that's a story for another sermon.) Each of these ladies is holding an oil lamp — but alas, the groom takes so long that the lamps begin to go out. The shortsighted begin to panic, for they have not thought to bring extra oil. But the wise have planned ahead and have enough to get them through. Naturally, the foolish ask the wise for some of their oil. In a shocking turn of events, rather than coming to the aid of those unfortunate gals who didn't think ahead, the bridesmaids with oil refuse to share! Instead, they send the girls to the store at midnight to buy oil for themselves. But alas, while they are shopping, the bridegroom shows up. The pastor says he is not waiting any longer, and by the time the girls get back from finding a store that is open and has lamp oil for sale, the wedding is over and they have missed the whole thing!

Doesn't this parable encourage selfishness? What are we to tell our children? Why didn't those bridesmaids share some of their oil with their friends? Remember that parables are stories that make one point. I think the point is this: **there are some things in life we have to do for ourselves.** My friend was willing to stay back and ride with me. But he couldn't train for me and condition for me. When you have a test in school, mom and dad can help you study, but they can't take the test for you. There are certain things in life that we have to do for ourselves.

One of these things has to do with faith. Now and then someone will tell me quite proudly, "My dad was a faithful member of the church." Or "My mom never missed a Sunday." Oh, but my friend, what about you? Someone has wisely said that God has no grandchildren. We believe in Christian education at Church of the Saviour. When I baptize children I urge their parents to make the spiritual development of these precious children a top priority for the family. But in the final analysis, every person must make his or her own profession of faith.

I remember in the first church I served on Stewardship Sunday a woman handed me three pledge cards. "I've filled out one for me, and one for each of my girls," she told me. "Have your girls agreed to this?" I asked. "Oh, you don't understand," she replied. "I give money for each of them. I hope and pray that they come back to church some day, but right now they don't

show much interest, so I give for them.” You need to know that this woman was in her 70's and her “girls” were in their 50's at the time. I understand this dear soul's concern for her children's spirituality. Believe me, I do. But her contributions, generous as they were, were no substitute for the commitment or lack of commitment of her daughters. God has no grandchildren. As I found out when I didn't train for the bicycle trip, there are some things in life that we have to do for ourselves.

This parable reminds us that the resources we need for spiritual growth are available to us if we avail ourselves of them. Had I taken the time to get in shape, I would have gotten along on the bike trip just fine. When the five foolish bridesmaids got to Walmart, it wasn't that the supply of oil had run out. There was no shortage. The Bible doesn't say, “Sorry, no oil.” It's just that the girls hadn't taken the time to get the supplies that they needed.

The parable also reminds us that our actions have consequences, and that it is hard to make up for lost time. In our personal lives, we pay the consequences for eating too much, drinking too much, and abusing our bodies in a myriad of different ways. I know people, and so do you, who realize that they have a high school or college class reunion coming up in three months and so they set out to lose fifty pounds. It just isn't going to happen. We have all heard the saying that there are no atheists in foxholes. While that may be true, if we have not developed a meaningful faith through the years, we will not have the spiritual resources that are necessary in our time of need. A friend asked, “Do you know why so many old people in Florida go to church?” Answer: They're cramming for finals! But can we really make up for lost time?

On the global scale, our actions have consequences as well. We are paying a heavy price for pollution and our disregard for the environment. It bothers me that our children and grandchildren will have a shortage of clean water and certain mineral resources, all because we have failed to be good stewards of the earth that God has given us. Our actions have consequences, and global warming is one of the prices we are paying for our irresponsibility as a society.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids reminds us of a word we don't like to hear these days, especially in the church: the word “discipline.” The only way to get ready for a 100 mile bike ride is to jog, to take short bike trips and to increase the length of those trips day by day, week by week. The only way to develop a meaningful spiritual life is to set aside time daily for prayer, Bible study and spiritual reflection. The only way to have meaningful fellowship with other Christians is to spend time with them in church and in small group settings. The only way to make God the center of your financial life is to make giving to the church the first priority, and then organize the rest of your finances around that. Do you believe in God? Do you want to follow Jesus? Christian stewardship is the sum total of everything you do after you have said that you believe. What has God given you? How can you use what God has given you as a statement of faith?

To be honest, there were some days I was training, when I didn't feel like riding my bicycle. Some afternoons it was too hot. Some Saturday mornings it was raining. But that first year I gritted my teeth and stuck with it. The second year, I did not. There are times our spiritual lives when God does not seem as real and as vital to us. There are times when God does not seem as close to us, times of emptiness and absence. The spiritual life seems to be characterized by peaks and valleys, engagement and disengagement. There are times in our lives when we feel especially close to God, and times when we do not. We must not despair in the dry

season. We must learn to wait, confident that eventually we will be renewed.

I heard a master of spiritual direction say something like this: “The spiritual practices of prayer, Bible study, and regular attendance at worship, are not simply what you do in order to get close to God, or to celebrate God’s activity in your life. Sometimes you do these things because they are what you do when God is not particularly close to you, when you do not feel a vibrant spiritual closeness.”(1) That makes a lot of sense to me.

I read a wonderful story recently, and with it I close. It is the story of a little village in the French Alps from Phillip Haile’s book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. The people of this village, unlike so many other French towns, hid their Jews from the Nazis during World War II. The villagers devised a wide array of means in an attempt to save their Jews from deportation. How did this happen? Phillip Haile believes that a major reason was the preaching of Pastor Trocme. Sunday after Sunday this faithful pastor preached simple biblical sermons to his flock.

One elderly lady faked a heart attack when the Nazis came looking for Jews. She had a family hidden under her chicken coop! Later, when asked why she did this, replied, “Pastor always told us, ‘One day Jesus will come into your life and ask you to do something just for him.’ On the Sunday the Germans came to our town, in his sermon, the pastor repeated the words, ‘One day Jesus will come into your life and ask you to do something just for him.’ Well, everybody in the congregation quietly nodded their heads. We all knew what we had to do. We were prepared for it.”(2)

The parable warns us to **“Be Prepared.”** Without warning, often in the dead of night, when it is very dark and you have trouble seeing your way, just when you least expect it, the bridegroom arrives, and there will be a test for you. **Are you ready?**

Prayer: Dear God, as we read about the ten bridesmaids, help us to remember that there are some things in life that we have to do for ourselves. I pray that all of us will open the door of our hearts that Jesus might come into our hearts this day. And may each of us be ready for what you have for us to do. Amen

Notes:

1. Quoted in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol.36., No. 4., p. 28.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 27.