

"Keeping Awake"

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November 12, 2017

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' ¹²But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (Matthew 25:1-13)

It is tempting to boil this parable down to one simple motto, the same one that was drilled into me as a young Boy Scout. "Be Prepared," our leaders told us. Be ready for any contingency. We did a lot of backpacking in my troop, and we camped year round, which meant that, when we went out on a camping trip, we needed to be prepared for a variety of contingencies. To be ready for precipitation, we carried sturdy rainwear, a change of socks and matches in waterproof containers. To be ready for cold, we packed wool hats, gloves and a sleeping bag rated for sub-freezing temperatures. To be ready for snakebite, I even carried a little kit that contained a small blade, a light tourniquet, and two suction cups that could be put over the fang marks to draw venom. We carried water purification tablets, extra batteries, plenty of fuel for the stove, and Swiss Army knives with all kinds of handy little gadgets on them. Our leaders taught us well: to be a good Scout, we had to be prepared.

It may seem that this is the lesson of the parable as well. Some of the bridesmaids were prepared; others were not. The wise ones brought the equipment and supplies they were supposed to bring -- lamps and extra oil. So it might seem that this is a parable about planning -- about making sure we pack up and stock the material things we might need to be prepared for any contingency.

I would offer to you, however, that this parable is about a different kind of readiness. Seven times in his gospel Matthew uses the Greek verb "to prepare" -- as when John the Baptist calls on the people to *prepare* the way of the Lord; when the disciples *prepare* the room for the Last Supper; or when the unnamed woman with her alabaster jar of oil *prepares* the living body Jesus for burial. If this parable was about preparing and checking things off of a list, then Jesus would have almost certainly used that word. But he doesn't. Instead, Jesus calls us to "Keep awake." So we are not just talking about a preparedness plan. Jesus is talking about a particular kind of wakefulness, a ***mindfulness*** that goes far beyond a mere checklist of things to have and things to do.

"Mindfulness" is a trendy term these days, but it does seem to be a trend that has some merit and enduring value behind it. A good definition of mindfulness is "the basic human ability

to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us."¹ In short, mindfulness helps us to see a situation accurately and maintain a healthy perspective about how we fit into the picture. It helps us see (1) what is **really** going on and (2) what we **really** need to do or not do about it.

In this parable, the key to maintaining this kind of readiness, wakefulness and mindfulness seems to be in the oil. That's the way Saint Augustine saw it. The distinguishing mark in the parable, he said, must be the oil. The five wise bridesmaids had it; the foolish ones didn't. Augustine of Hippo is a towering figure in Western Christianity. As a respected bishop, theologian and writer, his influence had a profound impact on the church, guiding much of the thought of both Martin Luther and John Calvin, the primary figures we have been discussing so much in this 500th year of the Protestant Reformation. And when Augustine preached on this parable from Matthew, he honed in tightly on the subject of the oil. "Some great thing," he wrote, "some exceedingly great thing does this oil signify."²

So, what is it? What does the oil represent? Some have said it is faith. Or perhaps hope in Christ. Others say that the oil is fuel for ministry, the inspiration that keeps the fires of our faith burning. Whatever it is, Augustine is right. The oil must signify some exceedingly great thing -- something that we must have to be adequately prepared and equipped as faithful disciples.

In today's world, the idea of being prepared has taken on a whole new meaning. Last Sunday, an armed gunman came into a worship service in Sutherland Springs, Texas with murderous intent. He took the lives of more than two dozen people, including eight children. It was the largest number of children killed in a mass shooting since twenty people died at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012.³ In the aftermath of this kind of tragedy, the first instinct for many of us is to draw up a plan, to make a checklist of what we can do to be prepared if, God forbid, that kind of violence should come to our own doorstep. And that is exactly what we need to do. The session will look specifically at what we need to do to "Be Prepared." Scouting taught me that very well when I was younger, and this parable is still teaching us to be wise in our preparations.

At the same time, the parable elevates the idea of what it means for us, as followers of Christ, to be prepared. When Augustine posed the question of what "exceedingly great thing" the oil in this parable could represent, he could see only one possibility: love. "Do you think it is not love?" he asked.⁴ How could it possibly be anything except for love?

The answer is right there in Paul's letters, Augustine says, when Paul urges us "to strive for the greater gifts," so that he can show us "a still more excellent way." For

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing... and now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 12:31-13: 3, 13).

¹ <https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/>

² Saint Augustine, "The Ten Virgins," *Great Sermons of the World*, Clarence E. MacArtney, ed. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson (1997), pp. 47-8.

³ CBS News, "Texas church shooting: 'So many babies' among those slain in Sutherland Springs," on November 9, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/texas-church-shooting-so-many-babies-killed-sutherland-springs/>

⁴ Augustine, 47.

It follows the same spiritual logic as the teachings of Christ, which are clearly in the background of this parable about the oil. When Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment, what did he say? *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments, Jesus says, hang all the law and the prophets.”* (Matthew 22:36-40).

It has to be love, Augustine says. The oil has to signify love. Love is what keeps the fires of faith burning.⁵ Love is what gives us strength. Love is the witness we must offer. We have faith, we have hope, but the greatest thing we have in Christ is love. This is the way Bishop Augustine said it in the sermon he gave on this parable 1,600 years ago:

*“[Love] is... above the rest, which is with good reason signified by the oil, for oil swims above all liquids. Pour in water, pour in oil upon it, and the oil will swim above. Pour in oil, pour in water above it, and the oil will swim above. If you keep the usual order, it will be uppermost; if you change the order, it will be uppermost. [Love] never faileth.”*⁶

As Christians, this parable in Matthew warns us to be prepared. But it also calls us to “keep awake” – to be wakeful and mindful that, whatever we do, we must always be carrying plenty of love... that the greatest thing we have to offer the world is a witness of love.

So, we will do our best to be prepared, even in this age of senseless violence. But as instruments of love, as people who have been anointed with Christ, we will need to make sure that our preparation is guided by love, and that means whatever checklist and plan we formulate cannot be formed out of fear. Yes, the theme of this parable is preparedness, but it is not preparedness for the worst of what may come, but for the best of what may come. The bridegroom was delayed. He had not shown up when the bridesmaids thought he would. Their imaginations could have turned dark with worry about what might have happened, what might be happening. Even so, the wise bridesmaids did not prepare for death; they prepared for life. They did not prepare themselves for dread; they prepared for joy. Most importantly, they did not expect to see danger at the door. They prepared themselves to ***greet Jesus at the door.***

So let us be prepared. Let us keep awake. But in our preparations may we remember that the only reason we are here is to worship the Anointed One -- the Messiah anointed with the oil of love who came teaching a message of peace. May we be mindful that our calling is not to do as the world does, but to let the light of our love “shine before others, so that they may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Let us prepare ourselves not for the worst, but for God’s best.

May the Lord give us courage to let the world see our love, and not our fear. **Amen.**

⁵ Wesley’s Notes on the Bible <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.i.ii.xxvii.html>

⁶ Augustine, 47-8.