



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Just Keep Swimming

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Matthew 25: 1-13; Luke 11: 5-13

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That’s not an easy parable that we encounter in the 25th chapter of Matthew. We can ride along pretty well with it for the first ten or eleven verses. We’re given this image of a wedding celebration with the attendants waiting eagerly for the groom to arrive – an arrival that’s taking longer than expected. We hear about the two groups – the prepared and the ill-prepared. Those who were prepared are confidently and comfortably waiting, while those who were not as prepared are scrambling to cover that gap with some last-minute heroics. Even at this point, the Eagle Scout in me is hanging on. ‘Be prepared’ is the motto you hear over and over in scouting, so this narrative still feels somewhat natural even up to and through this point of the story. Then things begin to turn.

As the ill-prepared ask for some rations from the others, they are curtly denied. The compassionate Christian in me struggles with that part a bit, but we press on. That struggling group, left to fend for themselves, rushes off to buy oil, only to return to find the door shut and locked. They try to get in – they glance through the window – they knock on the door – and all they get in response is the ‘groom’ (whom, at this point, we have all equated with Jesus) ignoring their pleas, rejecting them, and leaving them out in the cold of the night.

That’s where we struggle! We struggle with Jesus responding in that way. We struggle with this person who welcomed sinners – who sat day after day with those whom society had rejected – suddenly turning to those who had forgotten to bring extra oil and callously casting them out into the cold of the night. We don’t know what to do with that. We don’t know what to make of those implications. We struggle with that image. All the while, however, I think we miss that Jesus actually tells us pretty clearly what he meant. ‘Keep awake, therefore,’ Jesus says, ‘for you know neither the day nor the hour.’

For the first ten or eleven verses of this parable, we are able to hang on, and that Eagle Scout in me is marching right along with the narrative as those years of being reminded to ‘be prepared’ are reflected in the passage. Suddenly, however, we see this negative consequence of the door being shut by Jesus himself, and that’s all we can see anymore. Our hearts and minds are enveloped by this shut door and this seemingly harsh treatment by Jesus, and the result is that we too often overlook the fact that that the point Jesus was making was not about the rejection but about the preparation. ‘Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.’ The

point that Jesus is seeking to make in this moment is not one of a threat of retribution or exclusion but one of calling the people to preparation... to resilience... to persistence... in this thing we call faith. And we see the same thing in our reading from Luke.

Some of this passage will sound quite familiar, as we read its parallel from Matthew's Gospel last week. Luke's version of this passage, however, includes a bit more of the parable side of things as it recalls more of story that Jesus shares as context behind the asking and knocking that we talked about last week. This is Luke 11: 5-13:

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' 7 And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' 8 I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

9 "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish? 12 Or if the child asked for an egg, would give a scorpion? 13 If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

It's interesting, I think, to consider the fact that there's a bit of a conflict between these two passages – at least on the surface. On the one hand, you have Jesus saying that those who ask receive, those who seek find, and to those who knock, the door will be opened. Then, on the other hand, you have this group of people asking... seeking... literally knocking on that door... and the 'groom' is rejecting their pleas. It can seem difficult to reconcile these two passages – both of which came from Jesus himself. The end result of those ill-prepared bridesmaids simply doesn't mesh with the promise Jesus shares in Luke 11. It's hard to put these two together. It's hard to discern what to make of that fundamental contradiction. How does one say that our asking is always answered in one moment, only to tell a story of it being rejected in another? I would argue, however, that the coherence in these two stories from Jesus stems from that fact that they are less about the result than they are about the stance of faithfulness that they encourage in the first place.

The key in that parable of the Ten Bridesmaids is that the point is not about the door being shut in the end, but is about the persistence and faithfulness that avoids being sent out into the cold in the first place. Similarly, while the end result seems more appealing to us, the groundwork of what Jesus says in Luke 11 is the story of that person who keeps knocking on the neighbor's door – screaming through their window – refusing to give up on that provision they need in their lives. It seems, at first, as though the conclusions of these two passages conflict with one another, but the consistent message we find in these parables is not in how the stories end, but where they start. While that parable of the Ten Bridesmaids is encouraging those listeners to 'be prepared' in faith, in Luke 11 Jesus is telling people not to give up in their pursuit of God's blessings in their lives. Regardless of how they end, both passages are grounded in the same

lesson for the fortitude and persistence of faith that we embody in each day. And that, I want to suggest, has a lot to say about our Beatitude of the day.

Now in week four of exploring the Beatitudes through the lens the parables of Jesus, we come to verse 6 of Matthew 5. *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,”* Jesus says, *“for they will be filled.”* Every time I hear that phrase, my heart and mind go back to my maternal grandfather sitting at the end of the table at the conclusion of a meal. I’ve shared before that grew up in a family in which it seemed as though nothing was ever expressed simply. In my family, if you used only 2 words when you could have used 10, you simply weren’t trying hard enough. So, there was my grandfather at the conclusion of the meal, and my grandmother would offer to serve him more. If and when he had had enough, however, his response, invariably, was, ‘I have reached the point of satiety.’ I think of that, every time I hear this Beatitude, because the reason my grandfather would use that phrase was that ‘I’m full,’ or ‘I’ve had enough,’ didn’t do the trick. He was more than just full. He was more than just past the point of hungering. He was not only full, he was satisfied, and he was fulfilled – and his phrase was his attempt to express that sensibility, in gratitude, to my grandmother. In so many ways, that’s what Jesus is talking about here. There is a sense of not just being filled (or full) but being satisfied and fulfilled that is the ultimate promise of this Beatitude. It is as though Jesus is promising that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will reach their own point of satiety with God.

Meanwhile, that hungering and thirsting for righteousness? It takes us right back to those parables. There is a sense of yearning to what Jesus is talking about here. A sense of longing... A sense of striving... A sense of driving towards... This is not a passage about simply wishing that everything would be better. When Jesus talks about those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, he is talking about those who are faithfully and diligently striving towards the ways and will of God in their lives – no matter the circumstances of the moment. He’s talking about persistence. He’s talking about steadfastness in faith. He’s talking about being prepared, no matter the timing, as were those first five bridesmaids, and he’s talking about knocking incessantly on the door and screaming through the window in the trust that our persistence will ultimately lead to the unveiling of God’s blessings and promises in our lives.

When Jesus says, ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled,’ what he is saying is that the route to fulfillment and satisfaction in God lies in our unwavering persistence in living out the faith, not matter what the circumstances might be.

As my thoughts began to gel for this message, this week, I actually ended up changing the sermon title, because I could not get Dory out of my mind. Now, for those of you who didn’t have kids or grandkids of that age in the last 20 years, ‘Finding Nemo’ was a major Disney Pixar movie released in 2003, and it was the story of a lost clown-fish and his father’s heroic journey across the ocean to find him and bring him home. One of the main characters in that movie, voiced Ellen DeGeneres, was Dory – who pops up as the comic relief. Dory was a blue tang fish who had lost her short-term memory but pals up with Nemo’s father in this endeavor to find his son. All the while, Dory has a motto of her own – ‘Just keep swimming.’

It's really a life-theory for Dory in the movie – to just keep swimming – to keep pushing – to keep going – no matter the circumstance. From one obstacle to the next, Dory bounces along as she sings out, ‘just keep swimming... just keep swimming...’ It isn’t always easy – and her reckless abandon gets her into trouble here and there – but she never relents. No matter what happens – no matter the setbacks – she presses on in the confidence that the journey will lead to a better end if she ‘just keeps swimming.’

Now, obviously Jesus didn’t have Dory in mind when he made this statement. Nor do think that Disney’s writers had Jesus in mind when they wrote this motto for Dory – but I do think this is the heart of what Jesus is saying in this Beatitude. When Jesus says, ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled,’ what he is saying is that those who will reach that point of satiety in their relationship with God are those who just keep swimming. More to the point... Just keep praying. Just keep searching. Just keep knocking. Just keep asking. Just keep learning, and studying, and sharing, and listening, and reading, and serving, and helping, and trusting...

I could go on and on with that list all morning, but whether we like it or not, I truly believe that there is a ‘persistence’ side of this thing that we call faith. We can’t fully understand or articulate it. It’s hard, sometimes, to make sense of it. The undeniable experience of faith and the unmistakable witness of the Gospel, however, is that things often do not come in our way or our time, and faith’s greatest challenge can often be to press on in the midst of that waiting and to just keep going. ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.’ Or, if I can say it another way, just keep swimming, and eventually, you too will reach that point of satiety with God.