

### **“Prep Work”**

**When I work with couples planning their wedding day, I offer wisdom I’ve gleaned from years of officiating wedding ceremonies. The bride, and to a lesser extent, the groom, want all to go according to plan-- no hitches, no errors, no mishaps, no blunders. I tell them that despite their best efforts, something *WILL* go wrong. Weddings are spiritual events and mishaps are “humanizing” events used by God to make us humble and keep us from taking ourselves too seriously.**

**Murphy’s Law states that in any given situation, anything that can go wrong will go wrong. I tell couples to plan carefully, but understand that, *“Murphy will take you wherever he wants and there isn’t a single thing you can do about it.”***

**I’ve witnessed some memorable Murphy moments. There was the groom who was so nervous that when spoke his vows, he threw up. There was a bridesmaid who partied a *little too much* after the rehearsal. She was up till 4:00 in the morning, the wedding was at 4:30 in the afternoon, and she hadn’t eaten anything all day. As the service began I noticed her “wobbling.” Her eyes rolled back and she crumpled to the floor like Joe Frazier after being hit by a Mohammed Ali right hook. At Karen Gilliland’s wedding, the maid of honor’s dress caught on fire. There was a ringer bearer who refused to walk down the aisle with the flower girl because he didn’t like her.**

**When a couple wants a ring-bearer, I suggest putting decoy rings on the little pillow because it can be tricky removing the rings from the ribbon. I offered this sage**

advice to David and Beth Gilliland, but they didn't take it. When it was time for the ring ceremony came, David pulled the ribbon and tied the rings in a knot. Neither Dave nor his best man could free them, so I asked the congregation, *"Is there a knife in the house?"* Eagle Scout, "Mr. Be Prepared" Walt Gilliland sprang into action. He pulled a Swiss Army knife from his tuxedo trousers and came to the rescue. It was also Walt who saved the day by extinguished the flaming dress at Karen's wedding.

When it comes to weddings, I've learned to expect the unexpected. It was no different when Jesus' walked the earth. The wine was running out at a wedding reception and Jesus' mother told him he had to do something or the party would be a flop. Jesus told a parable about a king who threw a great wedding feast. None of the invited guests came, so he sent servants to the streets to round up all the guests they could find. The hall was filled. Problem solved. But the King entered and saw a man who wasn't wearing a wedding garment, the he had him tied up and thrown out.

The most persistent problem then as now was grooms who don't show up on time. This is what occurs in today's text. Ten maidens were waiting for the groom to come so they could accompany him to the wedding. To appreciate what is going on you need to know some things about wedding customs in first century Palestine.

It wasn't a one-day celebration. It was a week-long party in which the bride and groom were treated like royalty. On the night of the wedding, the groom went to his bride's home and took her to his home where the ceremony took place. But they didn't take the shortest route. They went from house to house where they were showered with blessings and gifts. The more houses they visited the better. Everyone knew the groom was coming, but they didn't know when.

Ten maidens anxiously awaited the arrival of the wedding party. Night had fallen, and the maidens waited, and waited, and waited. In the soft glow of their oil lamps they fell asleep. You couldn't tell by looking at them, but they were half wise and half foolish. The wise ones brought extra oil. The foolish ones did not. When the shout went out, "They're coming!" the wise maidens were ready to greet the party. The foolish maidens had a problem. Their lamps flickered and faded.

Now before going further I must tell you something. The Bible is an amazing book. It contains the greatest story ever told. I love the Bible-- but not this parable. The wise, well-prepared, think-ahead, do-it-right maidens bother me. They had extra oil, but when asked to share it with those whose lamps had gone out, they replied, "NO WAY! Don't come crying to us. It's not our fault you didn't bring extra. There's not enough for us *and* you, so get your own."

Apparently they missed Sunday school the day the teacher said God wants the haves to share with the have-nots, and that Jesus said we should do unto others, as we would have them do unto us.

Jesus turned many a situation of want into plenty. The wine almost out at the wedding banquet and he turned tap water into the finest wine the people ever tasted. 5,000 people gathered to hear Jesus teach. They hadn't brought anything to eat, and Jesus took a boy's lunch and turned two little fish and some little loaves of bread into a feast that satisfied everyone.

What if Jesus had acted like the wise girls? What if he said, "I'm not running a catering service. I'm here to teach you, not feed you." We don't want our kids taking parables like this to heart so they will grow up to be successful, selfish, stingy, hard-hearted investment bankers on Wall Street. Jesus turned want to plenty. From God's abundance we're given life, love, forgiveness, grace upon grace, and the gracious Word of God that lights our paths all the days of

**our lives. We've freely received and we should freely give. We don't hoard it. We share it.**

**Don't get me wrong. Preparation is necessary. When I preach I don't make it up as I go, though it may sound like it. Inspiring worship doesn't just happen, but requires thoughtful, prayerful preparation. Before a cook prepares a meal he must have the necessary ingredients. When preparing for fishing trips I organize my tackle lest I be without a lure that is catching most of the fish. I don't like it when things go poorly because of inadequate planning. We get angry when our leaders don't do their homework, and when faced with a huge challenge they don't know what they're doing.**

**The wise maidens would not share their oil, so the foolish ones had to go looking, but by the time they returned, the groom and all the guests had gone to his house where the celebration was going on behind a locked door. And when the foolish maidens knocked, a voice inside said, "*I hear you knocking, but you can't come in.*"**

**So this is what the Kingdom of heaven is like? Look out for yourself? Don't share what you've got with anyone who asks? Be prepared because while you're tending to other matters, Jesus may come, and there you'll be, holding a flashlight with dead batteries? Is this the message -- you better be "good and ready" or you'll find yourself locked out of the Kingdom of heaven?**

**I remember driving to Greencroft to visit Carl Kilmer. My gas gauge showed a little more than empty, but I thought I had enough gas to get there. I stopped at the light at the corner of Plymouth Street and SR 15. The light turned green and as I accelerated, the engine sputtered and bucked. I was out of gas. It was 3:00 p.m. and the factory traffic was heavy. A Seven-Eleven station was a half block ahead so I pumped the pedal and prayed. I had to get across the long chain of traffic that had been stopped by**

**the light coming the other way. If I put on the brakes I'd be stuck in the street.**

**But just as the engine quit, something amazing happened. There was an opening in the traffic at the corner, so I coasted across the lane, into the station and rolled to a stop at the pump. After a big sigh of relief, I put my head on the steering wheel and said, "Thank you! Thank you, Lord. I promise I'll never let the gas go that low again."**

**I hadn't prepared. I didn't heed the arrow touching the E on the fuel gauge. The parable of the foolish maidens isn't about the oil you might have at home. It's about the supply you carry with you.**

**Our lives are lamps that burn in the service of Jesus. The lamp of our lives not only illumines our path, but the paths of others finding their way in the dark. We cannot provide light unless we have light. I cannot preach what I do not know. You cannot share what you don't have.**

**I cannot ask Shelly to give me her piano skills so I can accompany hymns. I cannot borrow Ted's math knowledge that took him years of study and hard work to acquire. I cannot ask Myron for a big portion of his patience and positive outlook on life. I cannot borrow Lodema's prayer life. I cannot ask Betty to give me some of her passion for God. Sue and I can't borrow a happy marriage that took another couple years of love, forgiveness and sacrifice to create.**

**In his book, *Everything Belongs*, Richard Rohr says we must know the difference between *the center and the circumference*. He says, "We live on the boundaries of our lives...We confuse edges with essence... We claim the superficial as substance... We stay on the circumferences for so long that it starts feeling like the only life that is available."**

Living on the edge, we *think* we have plenty of time to do what's important. "I'll spend more time with my kids," you say, but you doze off and wake to find they out of college and on their own. "I'm going to write a book... one of these days, when I have the time... after I get the pressing things out of the way." "I know I should do more about my faith than sit in church on Sunday. I need to invest more time in prayer, study, and serving others. I'm going to invite people to church... soon...one of these days... when my calendar isn't clogged... when I'm surer about God...after I retire." We all fall asleep and a voice wakes us. "He's coming! The bridegroom's here! Trim your lamps. Let's go to the party. What's that you say? You're out of oil? That's too bad. I guess you should have brought along some extra, huh?"

No one can fill your flask for you. You can't borrow spiritual resources from others. You must find your own--not on the edge, but at the center, where God is. The time is coming, and may already be here for you to draw on what you've carried with you—the contents of the flask that fills your heart and feeds your soul.

Yesterday I saw a woman from the community walking toward our prayer labyrinth. She was bundled up against the cold wind with a hood over her head and her hands stuffed into her coat pockets. From the window I watched her slowly trace her way around the prayer path with her head looking down all the time. Against the background of a dark, dreary sky she was filling her flask with oil.

I don't know what brought her here. I don't know what's going on in her life, some great joy or deep sorrow or longing for insight in the face of hard choices, perhaps. Maybe she came because God feels incredibly close, or incredibly far off with no clue of his whereabouts.