

Living Today for the Great Tomorrow

a sermon

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Matthew 25:1-13

What a week.

Really, what a sad, horrifying week.

Last Sunday, near the end of the worship service here, during the big prayer just before the final hymn, I prayed that God would keep safe from terror all those involved in the New York City Marathon. The request for such a prayer to be included was timely, and wise, and sincere. Because only a few days before the Marathon, someone — filled with hate and with evil intent — rented a truck and then drove it down a pedestrian and bike path, killing eight people.

Well, the Marathon was a safe event. Thank God, there was no terrorist incident in New York City on Sunday.

Instead, almost an hour after our service ended, terror visited First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas.

Oh, let's not argue over definitions of "terrorism." Let's not pull out dictionaries to score political points. Let's not play partisan "gotcha" with words.

Surely, terror was felt, as terror was intended.

Twenty-six dead. Twenty-six.

An expectant mother.

An elderly person.

A baby.

Twenty-six.

It was a sad, horrifying week.

And then there was the further unveiling of the sexual depravity of powerful men, expressed without respect to political leaning or religious identity.

He did *what*?

To *whom*?

When?

These questions fit each one of the scenarios revealed over the last five weeks.

Each.

And.

Every.

One.

And their perpetrators.

I find it so appalling. Disgusting.

Don't you?

I want to shout at these idiots, "What's *wrong* with you?!!!"

I want to shout the same at those who try to defend them.

And I want to apologize to every woman who has suffered sexual harassment and even violence, who has been objectified or dehumanized or victimized, all those many who tell their stories with hashtag #metoo, and the many more who don't tell but whose stories are no less real, no less filled with pain, no less horrifying.

I want to say that I am *ashamed*:

ashamed of men,
ashamed of the toxic intersection
of male ego
and male power
and male entitlement
and male insecurity,
ashamed that my own actions may have, at times, expressed this same toxic
intersection.

And then out of that shame and anger and disgust I want to apologize, even though it is not my place to apologize, not for the misdeeds of others. I want to apologize, even though my apologizing (because it is not my place) paradoxically risks normalizing what should never be normalized but is, somehow, always, "normal."

It was a sad, horrifying week.

It's the normalizing that I'm thinking a lot about lately. I am disturbed that so much wickedness is commonly transformed into the unchallenged and the expected. I am uneasy, during this week when I also ponder my gratitude for those who have served in the military (some of you here today — thank you!), that we show our gratitude for their service by letting corruption continue unimpeded and allowing injustice to flourish. Is this why they served,

why they went into danger,
why they were wounded,
why they saw horrors most of us have been spared from seeing,

so that their country can *fail* to live up to its ideals?

Normalizing. I am very much bothered by the excuses and evasions, some of them pretending to be theological, biblical, "Christian" (that's in quotes, y'all), all of them asserting that such wickedness is normal.

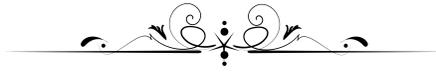
To be expected.
No big deal.
The price of freedom.
Happened a long time ago.
Thoughts and prayers (but nothing more).
Too soon.
Can't be helped.

Rubbish. It's rubbish: morally, politically, philosophically.

But I'm a pastor, so my job (they say) is to stay out of, or at least to stay classy with regard to, the political and the philosophical (and maybe even, to some extent, the moral).

However, it is, of course, my job to say that it's rubbish *theologically*.

And it is!



The passage from the Gospel of Matthew that I just read is a parable. Jesus told lots of parables. These are fictional stories told to make a profound spiritual point, these stories usually drawing on experiences and aspects of daily life:

seeds,
farming,
food,
travel,
debt,
family conflict.

And, in the case of *this* parable, weddings.

The parables Jesus told weren't factual accounts of real life people. We all know that. None of us would likely wonder

who these ten bridesmaids were,
what names they had,
what towns they came from,
where and when the wedding was to be held,
what style and color the dresses were,
the name and address of the caterer.

We don't push this parable to answer such questions, because we know that these are not the kinds of questions it is designed to answer.

But with parables it does get a little tricky, the more we push into them. Because sometimes we still end up trying to make them answer other questions they weren't made to answer.

Over the centuries during which the parables of Jesus have been read and pondered, plenty who loved these parables have tried to identify each and every thing in a parable, trying to give each element or item or character some allegorical meaning. And so often, when people have done that, it seems they have ended up missing the point of the parable.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids, or the ten virgins, has suffered similar indignities, with plenty of people in the end missing the point. Perhaps the biggest kind of missing-the-point for this parable is how people have taken it to be encouraging Christians to just sit around waiting for Jesus to return. This use, or rather misuse, of the parable would have godly Jesus people be disengaged from life and passive in the face of struggle. It would advise Christians to undertake as their only spiritual activity the self-interested prayers they offer and the self-centered religious practices they undertake.

But this cannot be.

Too easily forgotten, it seems, is all the other stuff Jesus says about living as salt and light in this world, of caring for others, of loving one's enemies, or turning the other cheek, of bearing witness to the Lord Jesus.

Too easily forgotten, it seems, are other things Jesus says about his return, such as later in the same chapter, where the Great Judgment is depicted as a division of sheep and goats, and the goats are condemned

for failing to feed the hungry
and welcome the stranger
and clothe the naked
and care for the sick
and visit the imprisoned,

so that their *faithlessness* was demonstrated by their *inaction*.

Too easily forgotten, or overlooked, maybe because it makes many uncomfortable, is that this parable and the others that speak of his return know that Jesus will come back to *complete* his work:

his work of mercy,
his work of healing,
his work of compassion,
his work of justice,
his work of forgiveness,
his work of truth,
his work of *shalom*,

and that on his return Jesus will expect that those who claim to believe in him will have shown their faith in him by having *participated* in his work.

Have we?

The wise virgins are not ostriches sticking their heads in the sand. Nor are they in denial about the world that surrounds them. They know the wickedness that lies all about them, and which lies in the hearts of so many.

But they don't hide from it. Instead, they confront that world with both bravery and compassion, with both moral zeal and holy love, seeking to *join* prayer and action, desiring to have action arise from prayer, welcoming even of policies and institutions that can help make the world more just and less wicked.

They keep their lamps burning.

They are prepared with oil (which cannot be shared or given away, these being the faithfulness to Jesus and the love for him and honoring of him that one must show for oneself).

They are alert, and even if they at times take their rest, they take it while still alert and prepared, diligent, watching for Christ's return.

They act in the light of eternity.

They walk in the holy glow of Christ's past, present, and future.

They are living today for the great tomorrow.



The foolish virgins are very different. They are unprepared. They pay lip service to faith in Jesus, but their lives show that their faith is at most quite shallow. For they don't really expect him to return.

Sure, good works don't make them or anyone else right with God. God takes the initiative, and in Christ God forgives the sinner and restores the rebel. That is the good news of Jesus.

But the *evidence* of whether one really *believes* that good news is living in a way that matches what Jesus taught and what he did. And the foolish, well, it seems that they really *don't*.

They are living today in complete denial of the great tomorrow.

How many Christians are like the foolish virgins? How many are speaking, acting, thinking as if his arrival is remote and his coming is irrelevant? How many are unprepared for the end, having lived as if their today's and his glorious tomorrow had nothing at all to do with each other?

Too many.

Too many Christians show the Lord, they show the whole world (who see the hypocrisy, I assure you), they show by what they say and by what they do

that they hate and fear others;
that they idolize war
and violence
and coercive force;
that they are dismissive of efforts at achieving a lasting, temporal peace;
that they place their ultimate hope in wealth;
that they are overly impressed with the treasures and accomplishments of
others;
that they will accept some evils as unavoidable,
so long as these benefit their own tribe.

It's as if they have forgotten that Jesus came

to challenge these,
to take these on,
to engage in a deep struggle against them.

He didn't come to leave these be, to let them go unanswered. His work was to fight against these evils, to heal us of them, and to remake us from head to toe so that we, too, would resist them.

And yet too many think that being a Christian means nothing more than having a ticket to heaven so they can escape these at the end. But in the meantime never to resist them, never to challenge them. Oh, no.

That's too political.
That's for religious fanatics.
That's not me.
That's just weird.

So many Christians, I fear, are unprepared. They are not watchful. They are not attentive to whether and to what extent all they do and say fit the good news of the Jesus Christ they say they accept and in whom they profess to believe.

They are not living today for the great tomorrow.



Karl Barth said, “This is the challenge of the parable of the ten virgins.... It asks the community whether it is active in relation to the new coming of the Lord, or whether it is merely passive” (*Church Dogmatics* III/2, 505).

Are we active, or are we merely passive? Do we act and speak in ways that fit what Jesus has done, is doing, and will complete? Are we ready for his return?

Ready with our challenge to every claim of “that’s just the way it is”?

Ready with our rejection of wickedness and harm,

even when it wears religious clothing,

even when it comes from “our side”?

Ready with our Christ-honoring deeds of mercy and love?

Ready with our participation in his work of healing and justice and recon-

ciliation and truth and love?

My friends, let us see to it that we are wise and not foolish (*Church Dogmatics* III/2, 506).

Let us confront the world with both bravery and compassion, with both moral zeal and holy love, seeking to *join* prayer and action, desiring to have action arise from prayer.

Let us keep our lamps burning.

Let us be alert and diligent.

Let us act in the light of eternity.

Let us walk in the holy glow of Christ’s past, present, and future.

Let us live today for the great tomorrow.