

Many of you received the email devotional sent out earlier this week where I talked about the Scout motto, “be prepared” and the obvious if rhetorical question often posed in response: “For what?” Being prepared, paraphrasing what scouting founder Baden-Powell himself said, means being always in a state of readiness in mind and body, having made oneself strong and active, able to do the right thing at the right moment.

The gospel reading this morning is, at least on the surface, a parable about being prepared, about being able to do the right thing at the right moment. Ten bridesmaids (or virgins, in earlier translations) await the bridegroom. Five are said to be wise, five foolish. It’s interesting that this parable makes only one distinction later on in to explain why they might be considered wise or foolish. All ten all arrive on time. They all wait, they all fall asleep. They all have their lamps, presumably ready to go, at least for the immediate time ahead of them. But while five are able to “keep their lamps trimmed and burning,” as the African-American spiritual says, the other five are not, and they miss out. This miss out on the wedding feast, they miss out on being in the presence of the bridegroom, they miss out on the exact thing they thought they were ready for. The only distinction the parable makes is that the five were truly prepared—both ready and able to do the right thing at the right moment.

We are at the end of our stewardship emphasis time for the year. It’s entirely possible that you didn’t realize that this was our stewardship emphasis time. It’s true, compared to other years, there has really not been much of an emphasis at all. Some of this is intentional, some of this just worked out that way. The parts that simply have worked out that way have to do mostly with being in a time of great transition, a changing of the guard, so to speak, perhaps exemplified by my arrival here as your new Senior Pastor, but certainly not limited to this as we are living in the midst of some equally large changes in administrative and program staff, along with a very natural transition among people in lay leadership as well. Some have

even marked it as a sort of generational shift and while I'm not sure that's entirely true, it can feel very true.

The parts of this year's sort of Stewardship Campaign "Light" that are more ***intentional*** have to do with how we frame the whole process we typically refer to as stewardship. As I said a few weeks ago, I truly want us as a congregation— as a community of faith—to think and see and believe and live out a new understanding of stewardship. I want us to begin to see that stewardship is about ***so much more*** than that one pledge we make or don't make as the case may be during the fall and so much more, to than what we put in the plate throughout the year. I want us to begin to see that stewardship—properly understood—is so much more than a money matter. It's a matter of being prepared—individually and as a group—for the ministry we think God has called us to take on.

Perhaps more than other times of the year, this is a season in our congregation when we are intentional about being prepared. We draft budgets and sign pledge cards. We recruit volunteers, nominate leaders, hire new staff people. We revisit strategic plans and convene annual meetings. We encourage estate planning, legacy giving, and donations of appreciated assets. We endeavor to be wise stewards of all that we have. We strive to be prepared. Which is a very good thing: we are called to be responsible with the collective gifts that have been entrusted to us. The first draft of our annual ministry budget is just over 1.3 million dollars again this year, and funding that kind of ministry takes intentional, generous giving on the part of the members of this congregation, as well as careful planning, monitoring and evaluation of the ministries we take on with that money.

But at the same time good stewardship in this day and age is also a matter of being flexible or maybe a better word would be supple or even agile, able to respond rapidly but appropriately to new information, new situations in our congregation as well as in the community around us. Most of us would freely admit that the way we prepare for, prioritize, fund, and staff for mission these days is different than it was when this congregation was founded in 1961. Things change. The community grew

and changed, the congregation grew and changed. The whole world around us grew and changed. It seems to me that Christ the King has been an agile, flexible, open congregation, willing to grow and change for the sake of mission and ministry several times over in the past 50 years. What's harder to see, harder to plan for, harder to prepare for, harder to fund, frankly, is not how the way we've done ministry has changed in the past 50 plus years, but in how it might change in the next six months, the next year, the next five years, and yes, the next 50.

I think that's why I don't really like this parable, or why I have a hard time staying with what has been its typical interpretation—why I'm not so sure that the message I saw in it even just a few days ago is the one and only way to look at it.

Sure, we're called to be prepared. Prepared to do the right thing at the right time. Prepared for God to be revealed among us. Sure, we are called to discern together what God is already doing among us and around us, and then join God in that mission. We are called to proclaim Christ crucified and risen, to proclaim new life in Christ by what we say, as well as by what we do. We are called to follow God deeper into our neighborhood—ready, willing, and able to “do the right thing at the right moment,” to respond to God's revelation among us.

But what does that preparation look like? And seriously, are the only two options bringing more oil or not bringing more oil, metaphorically speaking? What might this parable say about flexibility? Innovation? Creativity? What about sharing, doing more with less, taking turns, making all ten lamps burn a bit longer, rather than five flaming out and five burning brightly. Wouldn't that seem more like good news?

As one biblical commentator noted, any discomfort we might have with this parable probably comes from our own self-awareness. If we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we can be wise in some contexts and foolish in others. On an imaginary scale of totally unprepared to adequately prepared, there are certainly some people are more likely to prepare for *every* eventuality, but most of us vary from context to context. Preparation seems an arbitrary distinction. Being left out of

the wedding banquet, whatever we imagine that to be, that just seems, well, harsh.

But here is where this parable and its connection to our stewardship begins to actually make sense to me. It's a both/and. This parable calls Jesus' disciples to a state of constant alertness, of perpetual openness to God's dramatic future—a dramatic future that we can catch glimpses of from time to time, but cannot fully grasp until it truly arrives. We have to be ready, we have to be prepared. For what? That's just it, we don't really know what God might be calling us to next. So we're called to be prepared, but also to be flexible. Creative. Supple. Innovative. Agile. Ready to respond to something new God might actually reveal to us right in our in our midst, something that never figured into our strategic objective but that we know we need to respond to anyway.

So, we are called to wisely prepare, patiently wait, and intentionally respond to God's presence among us—always looking to the future that God has in store, eyes open to the possibility that there is more about God's future which is surprising and unpredictable than can be carefully calculated, accurately projected, or fully known. For now we see in a mirror, dimly at best. Still, we are called to imagine together, to discern together what our faithful response will be. We are called to prepared for the unknown, to plan for the unpredictable, to step out on faith, not always knowing where we go, but only that God's hand is leading us and God's love is supporting us.

These pledge cards are an act of faith. Faithful planning, prayerful preparation. They are but one of the ways we respond to God's call to engage in the mission God is already on, through the on-going and as yet unknown ministry of Christ the King.

Be prepared. Be flexible. But more than that, be faithful. AMEN.