

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

There are events in life, which have the power to transform the way we look at the world, indeed, in the way we look at our lives. Consider if you will the events of just the past few months. For instance, the hurricanes that swamped towns and cities throughout the South and the Caribbean Islands that caused people to flee their homes, leaving behind all the treasures and possessions they had spent a lifetime acquiring, carrying their children and dogs and perhaps a bag with a change of clothing, knowing their lives would be altered forever. Or think for a moment of those people who went to Church just last Sunday in that small Baptist Church in Texas. People just like us coming together, happy to see each other, seeking to praise and worship God, perhaps thinking about going home, enjoy a big meal with the family, maybe watch a football game later in the afternoon, whose lives would be snuffed out or forever changed in a moment of death caused by a deranged person intent only on killing other human beings.

In this parable about the ten virgins waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom, Jesus is suggesting is one of these types of transformative events. Weddings are surely transformative events in the lives of people. And apparently the circumstances haven't changed all that much from that time to this. Weddings never start on time.

In my 46 years of priesthood I suspect that I have officiated at close to 400 weddings. At the rehearsal I diligently admonish the couple to respect the guests they have invited at a particular time to be on time. Guess how many weddings I've had that ever started on time?

In this parable Jesus tells the story of a wedding that is delayed because the bridegroom has yet to arrive. Now this wasn't unusual in first century Palestine. A wedding could happen at any time within a given week. The uncertainty was considered a part of the excitement of the wedding. The bridegroom hoped to catch some of the bridal party napping. In fairness, in the hour or so before he got there, the imminent arrival of the groom was announced.

In Jesus' parable, the cry came at midnight. This was often the case. Most grooms chose to come late at night. The sleeping attendants woke up. It was then that half of them realized that they hadn't brought enough oil to keep their lamps lit. Panicked, they attempted to borrow some from the others. But they said, "No, for there may not be enough for us and you. Go, instead to the merchants and buy some for yourselves." While these "foolish bridesmaids were gone, the groom arrived, the door was locked, and the festivities began. When they knocked, seeking admittance, the groom replies, "Amen, I say to you, I do not know you." Jesus ends the parable saying, "Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

What is the Lord telling us in this parable? If I may, I'd like to make a few suggestions.

First, it says that some things in life cannot be borrowed. You and I cannot live on someone else's oil. We can help one another in so many ways, but at some point we're on our own.

This is especially true when it comes to faith. The faith journey is a narrow one and can only be walked two at a time—you and God.

Faith is the most intensely personal experience we will ever have in life. Our parents and families can guide us toward it. Our teachers can provide us with the truths of faith. Many can encourage us and pray for us. They can bring us up in the way we should go, but in the end, we must embrace it for ourselves. No one can do that for you. The five foolish maidens in the parable were foolish because they thought that they could rely upon the resources of others to get them through. What they found out was that there are some things in life that cannot be borrowed.

Secondly, the parable seems to suggest that there are some things that cannot be put off until the last moment. Isn't it amazing that most of the people who lost their homes in the recent hurricanes, even though they knew their homes were in flood plains, never purchased flood insurance, even though since it is federally subsidized, it is relatively inexpensive. Foolishly, most of the people apparently never considered that the floods would come. There are a lot of things that you can't put off until the last moment. Students are often amazed that even though they may have pulled "an all-nighter" studying before a midterm exam that they do poorly because their minds couldn't absorb three months worth of knowledge in one night.

Why is it that we so often put life's important decisions off until the last moment? Jesus is telling us it is because we are foolish. It is the foolish person who cannot see down the long road. It is not that the foolish maidens lacked any desire. They genuinely wanted to go and participate in the wedding feast. It is just that they didn't think to properly prepare for it. All too often we believe that heaven can wait. Yet, it is the wise person who does not put off the matter of eternity to the end.

The parable also suggests that if we are not prepared, we can miss our great opportunities. The issue here is one of readiness. Everyone, the fans, the pundits, even his coach, is amazed at the speed with which the Eagles quarterback, Carson Wentz, has matured into one of the best in the NFL. But the truth is no one has worked harder in-season and off-season, studying game films, developing skills, studying game plans and the defenses of the opposing teams. He is determined to be the best prepared player on the field. He is prepared to seize every opportunity that presents itself in a game on any given day.

Now, if I am reading this parable correctly, the Lord is telling us that we don't want to be so foolish as to be unprepared at the end of this game we call LIFE. Nor can we rely on someone else's faith, not our mother's, not our father's, not our sister's, not our brother's, not a husband or a wife or a child, to get into heaven. Jesus is telling us that only those who nourish their own relationships with God will be able to enter.

To wait until the final minutes of the game and still expect to win is foolishness the Lord is saying "because you know not the day nor the hour.

Wisdom dictates that we need to deepen our own faith and grow in our relationship with God through daily prayer, reading and studying and praying the Scriptures, and most importantly live lives of generous, self-sacrificing love for all who enter our lives, with a special concern for those in greatest need. To do otherwise is just plain foolishness.

Jesus is telling us in this simple parable about the tragedy of the unprepared life. The best way to get ready for tomorrow is to be ready today. A time will come in each of our lives when no further preparation is possible.

As I sat at my Dad's bedside on the night before he died, he said to me very matter-of-factly, "Well God has given me plenty of time to get ready. I'm ready to go now." They were the last words he ever spoke. As I sat there all night praying into the early afternoon of the next day when he finally died peacefully, those words gave me great comfort.

From that day to this, those words continue to challenge me. When that day comes for me, as it surely will, sooner or later, I hope to be able to say, "Well God has given me plenty of time to get ready. I'm ready to go now."

In today's parable, my Dad would be counted among those Jesus called wise. Could he say that of you?