

The Prepared Bride

Matthew 25:1-13; Titus 2:1-15; Various Verses

Years ago I heard that at least half the fun of an event, is preparing for it. If you go online you can find all kinds of lists on how to prepare for events of all kinds. And, it seems women prepare for any event, more than men. Men value natural talent and just winging it. Women work harder to prepare themselves as well as planning out an event. Now of course with any generality – it's dangerous because not everyone fits easily into these categories.

Consider weddings though. Who tends to do most of the planning? Who is outwardly more excited? The bride or the groom or parents? Which family members run and hide when issues come up in planning a wedding? The men of both the bride's and groom's families. When asked directly, they often mumble and shrug, as they try to guess what the bride really wants. Often men are non committal or at the most positive, say to the bride – “Whatever you decide will be wonderful. I love you.” Who spends hours plotting out who to invite, where to seat people, the wedding service, the color scheme, location, how to coordinate all the parts, and on and on? It's overwhelmingly the bride and the women she involves.

Now I know anything I say about this will get me into trouble. But think about it and do some research. How many event planners & personal assistants are women? In a congregation – who do we tend to turn to, to organize an event? It's usually women. Even if a male is in charge – who is it that often actually does the work and comes up with the best ideas? But planning often is a gender issue. Who is the leader and who are the followers in preparing for a wedding? Who spends the most energy and time and are the most anxious?

One of the themes in the Bible is the prepared church. One thing I've noticed about couples who are engaged to be married. They become obsessed with preparation. At least one of them

does. They want to make sure that everything is right, the dress and the tux, their weight, the hair, the color scheme; it all needs to be just right. Why? Is it so that their fiancé will want to marry them? No, they have already “caught” each other. They want to look their best for each other and have a wonderful special day.

The same is true for us, the church. We want to look our best for Christ. We want our hearts to be pure, our thoughts to be clean and our sins taken care of. We want our lives to be marked by grace and love. We want to be prepared for Jesus' second coming. It's not so that He will love us. He already has proven His love for us on the cross and by giving us the Holy Spirit, as well as the church. The point is, we want to be that pure spotless bride, because we are loved.

I think Jesus was saying all this and more when he gave us the parable of the 10 virgins. He starts the story by saying, “What will happen in the Kingdom of Heaven is like the situation which arose when 10 virgins took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.” This could have easily been a true story because of the way weddings in Palestine were run. So 5 women were prepared and 5 were not. 5 were wise and 5 were foolish. Jesus was directing his comments to the Jews who were and are God's chosen people. Their whole history should be a preparation for the coming of the Son of God – the Messiah.

Instead, many of them were & are unprepared. We find at least two universal warnings in this parable. First, the story reminds us that there are certain things which cannot be acquired at the last minute. Winging it at an exam usually just doesn't succeed. When Mary of Orange lay dying, a chaplain wanted to tell her the way of salvation. Her reply, “I have not left this matter to this hour.” To be too late is always a tragedy, especially when we've been warned.

A second warning from this 10 virgin's parable is: certain things cannot be borrowed. We can not borrow a relationship with our Creator. We cannot borrow character. We cannot be living

on the spiritual capital of others. These and many things, we must win and earn and possess for ourselves to fully experience God's grace.

The same ideas are shared in the other images we are given in Matthew 24 and 25. Jesus talks about keeping watch, judgment, and the end times. There is the parable of the three men who were to care for the bags of gold. Two succeeded and one didn't do so well. And the judging of the sheep and the goats is about recognizing who we need to help. Jesus spends two whole chapters telling us to be prepared.

I've wanted for quite a while now to reflect on the church as the Bride of Christ. For a variety of reasons, especially since our denomination's decision to allow congregations to accept LBGTQ persons as full members. When we use Bride of Christ terminology, it just doesn't sit as well with me as it did before. And I was hoping there would be conversations, studies & articles so I would hear what this now means – for help to get past the gender and sex issues. Maybe there has been, but I'm not aware of any such discussion. But we can't ignore scripture.

There are a number of verses, scattered throughout the Bible, mostly in the New Testament, about the people of God and specifically the church as being the Bride of Christ. Isaiah 62:5 offers this illustration: "For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." This is in a passage about Israel being restored, called a delight and married to The Almighty.

Isaiah 54:5 also declared, "For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called." This is in a passage about God abandoning Israel but then calling her back in compassion. Restoration is a common theme in the Bible.

And we have to mention the story of Hosea and Gomer. It's a beautiful story of God calling Gomer / Israel, the prostitute back to himself.

"And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'My Husband,' ...And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD." (Ho. 2:16-23) It's a beautiful story and word picture to help us understand ourselves as well as our Creator's longing to love you and me.

And a third prophet, Jeremiah, uses Bride imagery. He is told by God, possibly as part of his call to be a prophet, "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD, "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown." (2:2)

And in our series on looking at the purpose of the church, especially in this pandemic time, what does Bride of Christ theology look like in practical terms? We now have to do church differently and probably will do so in the foreseeable future. So how does preparation and Bride imagery tie together for us?

I can't relate very well to the church as "the Bride of Christ," since I've never been a bride. I never even wanted to be a bride! I just don't look that great in white lace and that whole garter thing totally freaks me out! There is a gender gap issue here. I think the reality is that women can relate to the idea of anticipating a wedding more than men do. I've participated in a whole lot of weddings, and it is rare that the groom is as excited as the bride is about all the ruffles and frills. Guys are more interested in the honeymoon than the wedding. Maybe guys are more excited about the destination today, because it seems many couples have already engaged in premarital intercourse.

But regardless, how is the church to prepare for Jesus' second coming? And what about being prepared for whenever we die? An old saying goes, followers of Jesus need to be prepared to preach, pray or die. I would add sing. And I think a purpose of congregational life is to help each other prepare. To be the prepared church,

in all kinds of ways. Fellowship. Learners. Witnesses. A centre of righteousness & justice.

For us today, how do we prepare for the future, after Covid-19 – if the pandemic ever ends? A key aspect of being prepared is to be attractive.

The Bible is full of lessons on how the church and followers of Jesus are to be attractive to the world. It's one reason many of the Apostle's Paul lists of what not to do and what to do, are so important. There are all kinds of ways that the church can be attractive to people, in attitude, in physical appearance and in the care taken during Bible study and worship.

Whether we want to admit it or not, people see Jesus in the local church which includes each of us. If we appear negligent in how we present ourselves, including the upkeep of our facilities, it says something about our view of our Saviour. Does the face that we present to the community say: We think it is important to do and be our best for our Saviour? Or do we just look and sound religious and really don't show Jesus?

Much of the Apostle's Paul's letters have the concern that his readers are living well for the sake of the Gospel. His letter to Titus is one example. Titus 2:10 tells Christian slaves and all of us, to teach the church in such a manner as to make the teaching about Jesus attractive. Why? So that in every way we will make the teachings about God our Savior attractive. People don't want to be a part of something that doesn't look good. Increasingly today, people don't do things just because they've always done them. People examine their choices and examine the options they have.

At no other time in history has the church been scrutinised more closely concerning the claims of the Gospel. Our outward attitudes, actions, and appearances are often the only visible means for people to examine us. So we need to keep preparing. As if we were the Bride soon going to meet Jesus the groom.

When the pedophilia of the Catholic Church became public, my first reaction was – This will hurt all established religions – not just the Christian church. The news media occasionally takes pot shots at pastors who live in multi-million dollar mansions, own jet planes and have lavish lifestyles. When Christian leaders are caught in scandals of various kinds – my thought is – that hurts the church's witness. And many of you have asked me why so many white evangelical Christians have voted for Trump. These activities do not help make the church an attractive bride of Christ.

These current negative images and the church's historical baggage, way too often overshadows its many historical and current positive contributions to society. Plus the number of verses in the Bible that use the bride, church and Jesus imagery is why I think we need to consider a key role of the church is to prepare. Prepare for the future. Prepare now to be the bride of Christ in all its dimensions. Prepare to be restored, to be called back, and to move out of Paul's lists of negative behavior into his list of positive, life giving traits. Prepare by using the wealth God give us wisely and prepare by being sheep caring properly for the helpless.

Just to be sure that I'm being clear, what makes the church bride unattractive? As I suspect we know, there are a number of things, but notice what the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12, 20. He tells the church at Corinth, that when he visits, what he is afraid he will find. He says, "For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder." These are just some of the things that make a church unattractive. These habits are proof the church is unprepared.

The church has long been recognized as the bride of Christ, even though that specific term is not in the Bible. We are told in Ephesians 5:27 that she will be presented to Christ, without stain or wrinkle or impurity or any other

blemish, holy and blameless. On her wedding day the church will be the most beautiful bride that anyone has ever seen. Everything will be perfect. Nothing will be out of place, and the entire universe will gasp as she walks down the aisle toward her bridegroom Jesus Christ. As he hears the fanfare & watches her approach he will know that all of his sacrifice and the price that he paid on the cross was worth it, because she is the most beautiful bride that is, ever was, or ever will be. So we could say our task is to prepare to make the church attractive to Jesus. We must not rest from this constant task.

One of the dangers of looking at Titus chapter 2 and Ephesians chapter 5, and such texts is that they have been fought over and grumbled about for years in our culture. But let's remember for our purposes today, Paul was instructing Titus to teach older men and women, younger women and men, as well as the servants and slaves to be positive examples as followers of Jesus so they would be prepared unlike the five foolish virgins in Jesus' parable.

And we get all tied up with the word "submit" in Ephesians, chapter 5:21, as it refers to the attitude that a wife should have toward her husband. But let's not get bogged down in that today. Instead, notice what Paul is saying. He's saying, that the relationship between Christ and His Bride is a model for the Christian couple.

Christ served and was willing to die for His Bride. The Church serves and submits and loves out of love and appreciation for the sacrifice Christ made on our behalf. The basis of the relationship grows out of verse 21 where Paul says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." If you want to know how Christian people ought to relate to one another, the model is the way Christ and the Church relate as a groom and His Bride.

There are a number of other New Testament verses that talk about the church as the Bride of Christ. One prominent place where God describes the church as the Bride of Christ is Revelation 19:6-9. John describes a vision God

laid before Him. This particular one portrays what will happen when Christ returns to earth. It is the picture of the bridegroom coming to claim the one betrothed to Him.

"Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: 'Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.

"Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen here stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "These are the true words of God." The Book of Revelation repeatedly mentions the appearance of the Bride.

For the church to be the bride of Christ, we have to take the steps to be prepared to be good witnesses for our Savior. We need to be a people, preparing for our Maker, just as a bride prepares for her wedding. This takes constant effort and vigilance. We are to do all we can, but we will always fall short.

This is the whole point of Jesus dying for us. For our sins and short comings. Not to devalue the importance of working to be pure and preparing for Jesus. But ultimately we as individuals and a church are pure and spotless not out of our own efforts but because of Jesus.

Weddings have the image of beauty, freshness, wholesomeness, purity and joy. Do we and our church look like this and convey this? We work at being prepared - attractive like a bride and groom does for a wedding. When we are successful with the Almighty's power and the Holy Spirit's guidance, the Kingdom of God is here among us. Praise be to God.