

*Sunday Worship
A Service for Your Use at Home
St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
Allen M Fluent, Pastor
November 8, 2020*

Because of the pandemic caused by the corona virus, our congregation, along with many others, has decided that we must forego gathered worship services at this time. Each Sunday until we gather again, we will provide worship materials that members and friends can use in our homes in the knowledge that we are not alone, but are celebrating these holy days with our friends and neighbors in the faith. As you use this worship service, I hope you will pause and remember the tune to a familiar hymn as you read the words, and pray as partners in the fellowship of Christ.

If you have access to a computer or cell phone, you may want to open the video recordings of the Sermon and Scripture provided by the pastor and the music for our hymn played by Della Leytze, on both our church website and the message sent to all who are on our email list.

Today our opening hymn is "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine."

***Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.
Refrain: This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.***

***Perfect submission, perfect delight, visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
Angels descending, bring from above echoes of mercy, whispers of love. Refrain***

***Perfect submission, all is at rest, I in my Savior am happy and blest,
Watching and waiting, looking above, filled with his goodness, lost in his love. Refrain***

Today is the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost. Today as we begin our Service of Worship, let us listen to these words from the Wisdom of Solomon, a celebration of God's wisdom for those who would seek to influence the world of human affairs. Wisdom is depicted in this reading as a woman who is desired by many, but is only available to those who demonstrate their care for her and are willing to be committed to her ways. We read from the Wisdom of Solomon, chapter 6, verses 12-25:

Wisdom is radiant and unfailing, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her.

She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her.

One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for she will be found sitting at the gate.

To fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding, and one who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care, because she goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought.

The beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction, and concern for instruction is love of her, and love of her is the keeping of her laws, and giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality, and immortality brings one near to God; so the desire for wisdom leads to a realm of power.

Therefore if you delight in thrones and scepters, O monarchs over the peoples, honor wisdom, so that you may reign forever.

I will tell you what wisdom is and how she came to be, and I will hide no secrets from you, but I will trace her course from the beginning of creation, and make knowledge of her clear, and I will not pass by the truth; nor will I travel in the company of sickly envy, for envy does not associate with wisdom.

The multitude of the wise is the salvation of the world, and a sensible leader is the stability of any people.

Therefore be instructed by my words, and you will profit.

Our Gospel lesson for today is taken from the Gospel According to Matthew, chapter 25, verses 1-13, a story about preparing ourselves for the coming of Realm of God.

The kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him. Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The Sermon:

(Note: For those who want to see and hear a video of the complete sermon you can find it on our church website or open the message that you will receive if you have given us your email address.)

Do you ever procrastinate? I do. I'll know I have something to prepare, and when I have to get it done and deliver it. I plan to get it done, but I see something else I want to get done first, and then its lunch time, and maybe after lunch I need a little nap. Soon the day has almost passed, and I worry that I'll be unprepared, so I find myself hurrying at the last minute to complete my task. If I hurry, I might get where I need to be on time, that is, if there's no traffic jam on the interstate, and if the car has enough gas, and if I don't forget my cell phone going out the door or forget the address of the place I'm going. And if one of those things happens, I can always apologize for being late, and most of the time people will understand, or say they do. Procrastination is a terrible thing.

Like most people who procrastinate, though, I am helped by having a schedule. If I know when events are being planned and what I'm expected to do for them, I can put them on a calendar and discipline myself to be ready on time. Most of the time, this works for me, but then there are the surprises: You know, like when you get a call from an old friend who says he's in the area, just a few minutes away from your house, and he'd like to stop by if it's convenient. Well, you'd really like to see him, and it would be convenient, except that the sink is full of dishes and you'd meant to pick up the living room from the craft project you had spread across the couch and chairs, and the laundry basket was sitting full by the door, and you know your friend is a neat freak who'll think you're uncivilized if he sees all of that. My wife, Nora, usually saves me from such embarrassment, because she just keeps the house in order pretty much all the time, just in case. I've never understood "just in case." I'm better at "only when I have to."

Well, the story in our Gospel lesson for today is about being prepared for something that will happen sometime, but you don't know when. It is a story about 10 bridesmaids at a wedding in the time of Jesus. The

function of the bridesmaids was that they were to meet the groom at the bride's house and accompany him and the bride to his house for a big party followed by the couple's first night together. This was to be done in the evening, so the bridesmaids each needed a small oil lamp to carry to illuminate the procession. The problem was that no one knew what time the groom would arrive, and on this particular occasion, the groom was quite late. Jesus tells us that 5 of the bridesmaids were wise and 5 of them were stupid. The 5 wise bridesmaids brought extra oil, so that they could refill their lamps, and the 5 stupid ones neglected this simple preparation. While waiting, all 10 of them fell asleep, and their lamps burned down. Then suddenly they were warned that the groom was on his way. Since the stupid bridesmaids had no extra oil for their lamps, they had to go buy some, and while they were gone, the groom arrived and the procession left, and they got locked out of the party.

Jesus said this story was like the Kingdom of Heaven. How is that so? It will help to know that the story was included in Matthew's Gospel at a time when the followers of Jesus commonly believed that God would bring the Kingdom of Heaven to the world within their lifetime, but no one knew when that might be. In a situation like that, procrastinators like me might decide that there was probably plenty of time to get ready for the coming of the Kingdom – plenty of time to do charitable acts, plenty of time to practice forgiveness and advocate for other people's welfare and practice hospitality and other Christian virtues. So, like the 5 stupid bridesmaids, members of the church were falling asleep on their Christian responsibilities; and suddenly the great celebration for all God's faithful people will arrive, and they'll have no faithfulness to celebrate, so they'll miss the party.

So how does this story apply to you and me? After all these years, most of us have become aware that the Kingdom of Heaven is not coming without our effort. When Jesus invited us to pray for God's Kingdom to come "on earth as it is in heaven" he was not talking about magic. The prayer is actually a summons for us to live by the ways of the Realm of God in the very midst of this world of trouble, so that we are prepared every day for the miracles of grace that can happen among us when we engage in an active commitment to the ways of God. Sometimes that becomes difficult for us to do;

we get tired of the effort it takes to be people of conscience and advocates for justice in a world that sometimes seems indifferent to these things. We wish God would hurry up and set things right, and sometimes we get drowsy and just decide to sit things out until God makes the world get better. But the message of the Gospel is that when we put off doing the work in our world that Christians are called to do, we might be caught asleep on the job, unprepared to enjoy the time of celebration when it comes.

Our Time of Prayer

Guide our preparations, God, for the day of righteousness and peace. Remind us that the coming of your Realm on earth is not something that you send us but something we partner with you to build. May we always be conscious that the individual welfare we seek for ourselves is dependent upon the community and fellowship of our neighbors with us. So help us see our neighbor's good as our own.

We lift up for your blessing those who are sick, those who are lonely, those who are depressed, those fearful of being infected by CoVid19, and those who have become tired of this long time of social isolation. We pray for the reconciliation of your people as the votes are counted in our national election.

May your blessings be upon our congregation as we gather physically, spiritually and by electronic communications. May we continue in faithfulness and good works, knowing that you are watchful over us in every time.

Next week, on November 11, our nation will celebrate Veterans Day, on the anniversary of the treaty of peace at the end of the First World War. May this day remind us of the sacrifice of many and the devastation of war, and the urgent calling to be peacemakers in our time.

Let us pray in the words of our Lord Jesus:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Benediction:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.