



Present to the Finish – Touchpoint for November 8, 2023

Matthew 25:1-13 (NRSVUE) The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten young women took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those young women got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ 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.’ ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Later the other young women came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.’”

Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

This parable, as parables do, raises some questions. Why didn't the bridesmaids share their oil, or suggest going in two by two with one lantern? Why did the door need to be closed? All these things were customs, not laws. It appears customs carried more weight than the people involved. Why couldn't they say, “Hey don't leave, we'll have enough light to show the bridegroom the way to the party!” The wedding planner might say, “No, that won't work, there won't be lights on both sides of the path. That's the way it's supposed to be done!” Why couldn't they light the path a different way? Instead, the bridesmaids left the bride and the groom to get oil, and were not present.

Would you agree with me that being present for the event seems more important than the oil? The oil was a means to the celebration. As with the bridesmaids, we are being asked to be present from beginning to end. The bridesmaids gave up being present for being proper. Many commentators believe *being prepared* is the important lesson. Being prepared is *the end*. In this case, heaven is for boy scouts and girl scouts. If a vow of being prepared is the end goal, perhaps heaven will be overrun with boy scouts. For sure I will be leaving my post for Ace Hardware in the middle of the night to get a compass. More likely, I will just fall asleep.

It wasn't the first time this occurred in the gospels. Jesus asked his devoted disciples to stay awake, to be present with him. When he came back, he found them asleep.

In 1980, a woman named Rosie Ruiz stunned the world with the third fastest time ever recorded in the Boston Marathon. After watching videotape of the race, Ruiz is not present at any of the checkpoints. It took eight days to disqualify Ruiz as the winner... long after the wreath was placed around her head.

The real winner saw no one in front of her on the last mile. Thinking she was cruising for a win, her exhausted smile turned to shock as she crossed the finish line, seemingly second.

To this day when you Google 1980 Boston Marathon, Rosie Ruiz comes up in the search. The winner, who prepared relentlessly for this moment, is not remembered much. Her name was Jacqueline Gareau and she was present from start to finish. Rosie Ruiz robbed Gareau's years of preparation by starting the race, ducking out, and taking a subway to the finish line.

In contemplation, we are invited to be present. The purpose is to be still and present to who is present with us. To prepare is to provide what will assist us in being fully present from start to finish. It is not a call to being doctrinally proper.

The bridesmaids were there to welcome the guests with a procession. It would signal the party for the bride and groom. In this case, the bridegroom was very late, so late that they all fell asleep. Five of the bridesmaids brought extra oil for their lamps. The others did not, and their lamps burned out. Desperate to not be caught without a lighted lamp, they plead with the wise bridesmaids to give them some oil. The bridesmaids refused and told them to leave and get their own oil.

There's another question right there. Why wouldn't the wise bridesmaids share? That doesn't seem too wise to me! The foolish bridesmaids were sent to Ace Hardware in the middle of the night. Well, there's a good choice. The bridegroom was already nearby! The procession and the party went on without them and when they arrived, the door was closed. I would ask myself what the bridegroom thought was important.

In the case of a marathon, most runners have little intention of winning. They want to finish the race... every stride marked with intentional breathing when physically challenged, and mindful reflections of the year of training. Exhausted at the finish, they fall into the arms of supporters who have been present with them from start to finish. Most runners, like Jacqueline Gareau, will never be known. But they will know *themselves* better than ever.

In our spiritual life, to be present is the goal, not Bible reading. Contemplative practices are not the Mystery, they are the means to be present to the Mystery.

So often in Christianity we assign the title of spiritual giant to those who carry seminary degrees, speak with eloquence, or have a righteous podcast. To reach these positions through intellectual means alone is much like the wreath Rosie wore in the circle. While means is good preparation, we need to sit present with God in contemplation.

What if we were to take this 30-minute service as an invitation to silence from the minute we heard the singing bowl ring? Three tones that say Be... With... Me and at the end Go... With... Me... During music, we sit present communally, listening to the way Spirit rests with us or speaks to us individually. We don't run out and get more knowledge to do it right and we certainly don't need to get oil.

Where do we get the oil when we feel like we are unprepared? Let's try it right now. It is a practice that we should welcome doing uncomfortably at the beginning, until we long to return. Take natural deep breaths as I read. To be anointed with oil is to know we need not go to Ace Hardware.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Amen

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir, Remember Me)

Be still, know that I am God

You Lord Are in this Place

(Keith Duke)

You Lord are in 1)...this place.
2)...my heart. 3)...my mind. 4)...my life.
Your presence fills it.
Your presence is peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Lead Me, Lord

(Discovery Singers)

Lead me, Lord. Lead me in thy righteousness.
Make thy way plain before my face.
For it is thou, Lord, thou Lord only, that makest me to dwell in safety.

The Meal

Lord's Prayer

(Robert Stone, The Cambridge Singers, John Rutter)

Benediction

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

(National Lutheran Choir, Peter C. Lukin)

The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord lift his countenance upon you.
And give you peace....
The Lord make his face to shine upon you.
And be gracious unto you.
The Lord be gracious unto you. Amen