

Bethlehem Lutheran Church
A Reconciling Works Congregation of the ELCA welcoming the LGBTQ community
- A multicultural, all-inclusive ecumenical ministry

P.O. Box 338 | 838 W. Hallandale Beach Boulevard, Hallandale Beach, FL 33009
Phone 954-454-2954 | Fax 954-454-2992 | Info@BLCHallandale.org
BLCHallandale.org | BLCHallandaleBlog.com | Facebook.com/BLCHallandale | Twitter.com/BLCHallandale

The Rev. Dr. David O. Guss, Fr., Ph.D.

November 12, 2017 – 23rd Sunday after Pentecost
“Are You Ready For The Big Date?”

A young woman busied herself getting ready for a blind date. She was to have dinner at an exclusive restaurant with live music and dancing. She was excited. She went out to have her hair done, spent time getting her makeup just right, put on her best dress, and was ready for her date's arrival. However, his expected arrival time came and went. After waiting an hour, she decided she had been stood up. Disheartened, she took off her dress, let down her hair, put on her pajamas, gathered a box of chocolates around her, and sat down to watch TV. About an hour later the doorbell rang. It was her date. He looked at her with a surprised expression and said, "What? I gave you an extra 2 hours and you're still not ready?"

Another story is told of an old Calvin and Hobbes comic strip. Calvin says to Hobbes: "Live for the moment is my motto. You never know how long you got. You could step into the road tomorrow and WHAM, you get hit by a cement truck! Then, Calvin asks Hobbes, "What's your motto?" Hobbes replies: "My motto is 'Look both ways before you step out into the road.'"

One of the most important and persistent questions throughout life is, are you prepared? Are you "looking both ways before you step out into the road"? We might ask a child if she is prepared to begin 1st grade? Does she have the required social skills? Does she recognize her letters and numbers? Later we might ask a teenager, is he prepared for his driver's exam? Or, is she prepared for college? Or, how about this one: is he or she really prepared to be a parent? Then, there are these questions - Are you ready to buy your 1st house? Do you know your FICO score? Do you have enough for a down payment? Later in life, we might ask the question, are you prepared for retirement? Have you saved enough money? It's a question that keeps popping up and follows us throughout life - are you prepared? And, who has not heard a preacher at 1 time in his/her life ask the question: are you prepared to meet your Maker? It's a question we may want to avoid, but whether we are speaking about secular or spiritual matters, preparation is required for success!

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable from common everyday life. He said the kingdom of heaven will be like 10 young women who took their lamps with them when going out to meet the bridegroom. You see, in Jesus' culture, weddings had some rather distinct features. The groom and his family would gather at their household while the bride, her family, and her guests gathered at her household. Then, the groom and his family would make their way to the bride's house to collect the bride. It would be late in the night when the groom would arrive to escort the bride back to his father's house. Last minute haggling between the groom and his father-in-law over the dowry, which was commonplace, delayed the wedding even longer. But, when both parties finally agreed upon the dowry, the groom would lead the wedding party back to his father's house for the ceremony. But, there were even more delays. The wedding party always took the longest route back to the groom's father's home. The more houses they visited, the more well-wishes and gifts they received. As a result, no one ever knew when the couple would return for the final festivities to occur. But, these 10 young women with lamps had to be ready when the wedding party would arrive at the groom's father's house, because once the ceremony began, the doors would be shut and they would not be reopened. If these young women were not there, they would miss the festivities.

Well, you know the rest of the story. Five of the young women planned ahead and 5 of them did not. Jesus called the unprepared 5 young women "foolish." The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. As the story goes, the bridegroom took forever to come, and all the women became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: "The bridegroom is near! Women, come out to meet the groom!" The young women woke up and began to trim their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise ones, "Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out." The prepared young women replied, "No way, we do not have enough oil for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves." But, while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The young women who were ready went in with the groom to the wedding banquet. But, when the unprepared women returned to the groom's house, the door was bolted shut. They shouted, "Sir! Sir, open the door for us!" But, it was too late. Jesus then added these important words, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." The meaning of our text for today is clear: There are people who will possibly miss the opportunity to enter the Kingdom of heaven because they are not prepared. That is what our Gospel lesson is about today - Christ's return to earth at the end of time. It may be 1000's of years away, or it may be today – we don't know. Still, Christ tells us - be prepared. Be prepared to give an account of your life.

So, today's 1st spiritual lesson is, be prepared. Now, I don't want to sound like an insurance salesman today, but, once again, this is perhaps the most critical question in life that there is: are you prepared? Life is full of the unexpected. Is that not true? As someone has said, "If you want to make God laugh, show him your plans." The reality is there are things that sometimes happen in life that we cannot prepare.

And, this brings us to our 2nd lesson is this: in spite of one's deep spiritual commitment, God still sends rain on both the just and the unjust. A woman coming from work says to her husband, "I don't want to upset you, but I put a scratch on the left rear fender of my car." Her husband replied, "That doesn't sound too bad." She said, "It's not. If you want to look at it, the fender is in the trunk." Perhaps it was a little more than a scratch. No one intends for accidents to happen, but they do. No one intends for terminal illnesses to occur, but they do. No one intends for layoffs, or bankruptcies, or stock market downturns. But, life is filled with unexpected, unintended, sometimes tragic events.

The parent of every teenager with a driver's license is aware that something could happen when his or her inexperienced son or daughter is driving behind the wheel. Many of us who are in our middle and later years of life have friends who have died untimely deaths because of disease or heart attacks. And, we wonder, could I be next? Life is fragile, and there are no guarantees of success or happiness for any of us. God never promised life on earth would be a rose garden nor did he say we would receive protection from life's frequent twists and turns. We know this is true with our heads, but it's hard to convince our hearts.

And, of course, this brings us to our 3rd lesson this morning. All we can turn to is our faith. I like the old story told about an elderly man who had just taken his 1st airplane ride. His family waiting for him asked him when he had arrived, "John, did you enjoy the flight?" John replied, "To tell you the truth, I didn't put my full weight down on that seat the whole trip." You and I know what John meant, don't we? John felt he never could place his full weight down in the seat and relax on his airplane trip.

What I am saying is this – when I ask you if you are prepared, I am not trying to raise your level of anxiety. On the contrary. I am asking you to consider increasing your level of faith. It is time for us to let our full weight down on our seats. That is the best preparation we can make learning to trust in God so much that we are able to say with the Old Testament figure Job, who experienced every imaginable catastrophe, "I know that my Redeemer lives." We ought to be like little children who awaiting Daddy's return to take us back home with him. Now, this kind of faith and trust rarely happens overnight. It usually develops from a lifetime of trusting God in all kinds of situations. It comes from being able to draw upon a deep reservoir of scripture and experience of God in prayer. It comes from years of living for God and testifying to God in all kinds of circumstances. Just as an athlete strengthens his body through regular workouts, so the believer in Christ strengthens him/herself by daily living his/her life for Christ.

St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians: "I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings. All runners run in a race, but only one wins. So, run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes goes into strict training. They run to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever." ...And, so as I close this message by asking you once more, "Are you prepared? Are you prepared for life? Are you prepared for death? Are you prepared for disappointments and heartbreaks and everything that goes with being human?" You can be if you are willing to put yourself, those you love, and all you treasure, into God's hands. Put your whole weight on God this day. Your lamp will be filled to overflowing. And, you will be prepared today, now, and forever more. Amen.

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