

First Congregational Church of Wakefield, United Church of Christ

The Rev. John Tamilio III, Pastor

Pentecost XXV: Sunday, November 10, 2002

Sermon: "In What Do We Hope?" (Matthew 25:1-13; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

We are almost at the end of Matthew's Gospel. In fact, in exactly three weeks from today we will begin the season of Advent and the next cycle in the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B, in which we focus on the Gospel According to Mark. (*Yes, I am just as shocked as you are to think that Advent is less than a month away!*) At this point in the Matthew narrative, Jesus is trying to squeeze-in his final teachings to the disciples before he is betrayed, brought to trial, and crucified. Think about this question for a moment: if you knew that you were going to die in just a few days, how would you spend that time? If you are anything like me, you would spend it with your family and closest friends. You would probably tell them the things that you considered *most* important. Let's face it: you don't have much time left. When else are you going to be able to say these things? This would lead one to believe that whatever Jesus had to teach his disciples in his final days was crucial: the central piece to everything that he had been trying to teach them for the last three years. At the beginning of the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, exactly one chapter before we read about the plot to kill Jesus, we hear the parable of the ten bridesmaids.

This is a peculiar tale. Ten bridesmaids go outside to wait for the coming of the bridegroom who is late. Five of the bridesmaids are wise: they take enough oil with them to keep their lamps burning throughout the night. Five of the bridesmaids, however, are foolish: they took no oil with them. Now in all good stories, everything happens at midnight — and so it is in this parable. Midnight strikes and someone shouts that the bridegroom is coming! The bridesmaids jump to their feet and trim their lamps. The foolish ones ask the wise maidens for oil. "Give us some of your oil," they plead, "for our lamps are going out." The wise bridesmaids tell the foolish ones that there is not enough oil for all of them. They advise the foolish maidens to quickly go and purchase some oil from the merchants. While they are gone, the bridegroom arrives and, with the five wise bridesmaids, he enters the wedding banquet. The doors are then closed. When the five foolish bridesmaids return, they ask the bridegroom to let them in, to which he responds, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Jesus ends the parable by saying, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

That's it! That's one of the very last things that Jesus teaches his disciples. He has spent the last three years curing the sick, performing miracles, and teaching his followers to love God and one another, and here, at the eleventh hour, he tells them a story through which he warns them to keep alert, because you do not know the day or the hour that I will return.

Many of the parables deal with this notion of Christ's second coming and often times a wedding celebration is used to symbolize the heavenly banquet that will follow Christ's return. The story of the bridesmaids is a lesson to all of us: make sure that you are ready to enter the banquet hall when the bridegroom returns. Do not be like the

foolish bridesmaids who were left out in the dark.

On more than one occasion, I have preached about how such passages on the second coming of Christ do little more than frighten people with a *you-better-do-this-and-so-or-else* theology. This isn't the Jesus that I believe is coming at the end of time. In fact, when I think about the end times, my mind does not conjure up images of hell-fire-and-brimstone; rather, it conjures up images of hope. That is Paul's message in his First Letter to the Thessalonians in our Epistle Reading for this morning.

In this passage, Paul also talks about the coming of the Lord, which, interestingly enough, he thought was going to be in his lifetime. Paul is probably answering a concern that the Christians in Thessalonica had here when he tells them, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." Paul continues and basically tells them that those who have died will rise with Christ first when he returns and then those of us who remain "will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air."

As you know, my Uncle Chi Chi died at the end of last September. At the reception following his funeral, I was talking with one of my cousins who lost her father several years ago. She asked me a question that relates directly to what Paul is talking about here — an issue that is problematic for many Christians. (I think that being a minister is a lot like being a doctor. I imagine that when a doctor goes to family gatherings, his or her relatives bombard him or her with medical questions seeking free advice. My relatives bombard me with theological questions seeking spiritual advice.) "Is my father in heaven?" my cousin asked me as we stood in the buffet line. "Why wouldn't he be?" I responded. "Because," she said, "doesn't the Bible say that when people die they do not go to heaven right away? Don't they remain in a state of death, a state of nothingness until the second coming of Christ?" This is exactly what Paul suggests to the Thessalonians: "For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first." I wish I recorded my response, because if I had it on tape it would have taken me much less time to write this sermon.

There are a number of passages in the Bible that talk about what happens when we die. There are a number of theories and theologies. Some people believe that when we die, we go straight to heaven and are reunited with all those who have gone before us as we bask in the eternal glory of God. How many times have you heard someone at a funeral say, "She's in a better place now" and "We will meet again someday"? That is someone who believes in what I just described. On the other hand, there are people, as my cousin's question illustrates, who believe that when we die we basically remain in a state of death — a state of complete, inert unconsciousness — until Jesus returns at the end of time to judge the dead and the living. The first belief is typically associated with more mainline, liberal Christians, whereas more conservative, fundamental, and evangelical Christians hold the second. There is no easy answer. The jury is basically out, because there are passages in the Bible that support both theories.

I could end the sermon there, but I'm sure that I would receive a similar round of questions during coffee hour.

In order to answer that question — the question about what happens when you die — you need to ask yourself two other questions first. The first question is *what are the things (or the sources) that determine your religious beliefs?* In other words, are your beliefs based solely on what the Bible says, or are they also based on the religious and cultural traditions in which you were raised, personal experience, and reason? For most people, it includes all these things. What the Bible says is important, but the Bible must remain in dialogue (so to speak) with you and all the things that make you unique: your church life, the experiences that have shaped and continue to shape your life, and your ability to make sense of it all. The second question, which is related to the first, is the one printed in today's bulletin — the title of this sermon: "In What Do We Hope?"

Ask yourself that question: "*In What Do We Hope?*" The first half of the first verse of the hymn we just sang offers one answer: "My hope is built on nothing less/ Than Jesus' blood and righteousness." But our hope is not *just* based on the cross. It is based on the resurrection as well. One of my seminary professors once said to us, "If you dismiss the resurrection, then the rest of the Christian faith is basically meaningless, because without the resurrection Christianity is robbed of all its hope." He was absolutely right!

The Christian faith is centered on the hope embodied in Christ's resurrection, one of the greatest mysteries of our faith. Through this miraculous act, God has defeated the powers of sin and death for all eternity. It is *an accomplished event* that we have at our disposal now. It isn't something that Christ has yet to achieve, something he promises to achieve when he returns at the end of time. I believe that the eternal life that we see in the resurrection is something we will experience the moment we die, because it is something that we are already experiencing.

I once heard a story that illustrates this point, and the struggle we have with it, best. Some people attribute this tale to Norman Vincent Peale. Others say that it is anonymous. In any event, it is called "The Parable of the Twins."

Once upon a time, twin boys were conceived. Weeks passed, and the twins developed. As their awareness grew, they laughed for joy. "Isn't it great that we were conceived?" they said to one another. "Isn't it great to be alive?"

Together the twins explored their world. When they found their mother's cord that gave them life they sang for joy, "How great is our mother's love that she shares her own life with us."

As the weeks stretched into months the twins noticed how much each was changing. "What does this mean?" asked the one.

"It means that our stay in this world is drawing to an end," said the other one.

“But I don’t want to go,” said the first one. “I want to stay here always.”

“We have no choice,” said the other, “but maybe there is life after birth!”

“But how can that be?” responded the one. “We will shed our life cord, and how is life possible without it? Besides, we have seen evidence that others were here before us and none of them have returned to tell us that there is life after birth. No, this is truly the end.”

And so the first twin fell into deep despair saying, “If conception ends with birth, what is the purpose of life in the womb? It is meaningless! Maybe there is no mother after all.”

“But there has to be,” protested the other. “How else did we get here? How do we remain alive?”

“Have you ever seen our mother?” said the one. “Maybe she only lives in our minds. Maybe we made her up because the idea made us feel good.”

And so the last days in the womb were filled with deep questioning and fear and finally...the moment of birth arrived.

When the twins had passed from their world, they opened their eyes and cried, for what they saw exceeded their fondest dreams.

My hope is built on nothing less.

Amen.