



# Pastor Ken's Sermon

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SERMON – 23<sup>RD</sup> PENTECOST

MATTHEW 25:1-13

NOVEMBER 8, 2020

**“LET’S GET THIS PARTY STARTED.”**

I want to speak to you today about giving. First, I want to thank you because you give. About this time last year I asked you to make commitments to support our congregation and its ministries in 2020 and you’ve done that – even exceeding our hopes, in spite of the fact this has been one of the most extraordinary and trying years in recent memory. Your faithfulness in giving continued when we were apart for nine weeks in the spring and many of our members out of concern for health and safety have not returned to these worship services, yet they too have kept giving. You are deserving of our gratitude so please accept it. We were prepared to have to make do with less this year, yet by all appearances, we’ll meet or even exceed our expectations in giving. I was taught that with a “please” should come a “thank you.” So once again, thank you.

I also want to talk about what giving is, and for that I am going to refer to a story that would not be at the head of the list of Bible texts for a sermon on giving – the *Parable of the Bridesmaids*. To our ears it invites a certain bewilderment – after all it involves a wedding day that seems to be in complete disarray – no schedule, a groom that disappears for an extended time only to re-emerge and hastily close the door on some of the very people he’d invited to the wedding banquet. It’s fairly safe to assume the overdue groom is Jesus, particularly on the strength of other parables in Matthew that speak of a master or vineyard owner who “*goes away and then returns unexpectedly.*”

It’s safe to assume the bridesmaids are those Jesus has invited into his kingdom by faith just as vineyard workers or day laborers represent such in the others. What the lamps and the oil represent, or who the dealers in oil are, is less certain - some say faith, others good works, as if there is a convenient way to separate the two. But deciphering the metaphors is not the point of the story. If the “*shout in the middle of the night*” is the end of the age - the coming of Jesus to judge the living and the dead as we confess in our creed - then this story is simply about being ready by living attentively, intentionally, and gratefully through faith active in good works.

Giving is a good work – but it is also a confession of faith. It is one of many things that a Christian does because they believe. Salvation is the free gift of God in Christ Jesus – so declares Romans 6:23 and Ephesians 2:8. But as Ephesians 2:10 goes on to say; “*good works are what we were ‘created in Christ Jesus’ to do.*” Chris Willard and Jim Sheppard, in their book “*Contagious Generosity*” said “*(giving) is more than an obligation. It’s an opportunity to witness the reckless nature of God who gives the gift of salvation by grace to everyone who receives it.*”

If we may attempt a conclusion from or distinction between the “wise” and “foolish” maidens in our parable – it is that the wise were, like their Lord, a bit more reckless. For reasons one can only speculate as to, they purchased an abundance of oil in the event of a delayed bridegroom though they had no way

of knowing how delayed he would be. The foolish played it cautiously. But that is not the sort of kingdom Jesus came to establish – a cautious one.

Patient...steadfast...longsuffering – yes. But not cautious. Givers should be discerning. That is all the more reason why on behalf of your leadership as well as myself, I thank you today. You could have played it cautiously this year ... but you didn't. You had other causes that appealed to you for support – I'm sure of that, and I hope you supplied them as well. We, like any organization you support, can give you reports and pie charts showing you what your giving enables, but nothing can calculate joy...nothing can measure the goodness that blossoms inside a person when they give. I have said this before, but it bears repeating – I can think of no greater thing to do with money, as well as time and ability – than give it away.

Some of you may recall that the great comedian Jack Benny was noted for his persona as being stingy. Mr. Benny once gave a performance for a charity, and made it known he would not accept payment for his work. But he added – tongue in cheek no doubt - *“just in case I WAS accepting the money...how much was I refusing.”* Giving doesn't look at itself...wise maidens didn't measure out their oil to last only so long – they invested in abundance. The bridegroom and his banquet simply could not be missed – generosity does not know when to quit – it's always looking for the next opportunity – let's for our purposes call it a party to get started.

The circumstances of this year could easily leave us all “out of sorts” – fatigued, resentful, fearful, the sorts of feelings that can choke gratitude. I pray you not let that happen...as I thank you for the very evidence that tells us that you have not and will not. And I urge you even now to begin to make provision for how you will support us in the coming year. In some sense, that is a challenge to decide how you will live – what you might relinquish in order to support our work here and that of our mission partners. I hope you make bold commitments, but I know that many other organizations are helping folks harmed by the downturn of our economy and the specter of a slow recovery. As you decide what to supply to us, please also think of them.

I've never met anyone who could honestly tell me they regret their giving. Which begs the question – *“how much should you give?”* I've preached in the past about the biblical concept of the tithe – a tenth of what you expect to receive. It's a good place to start your deliberations. We'll say more about giving next time, but I leave you with these thoughts by English author C.S Lewis, who said *“I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I'm afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can easily spare...if our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charity excludes them.”*

Wise words. Resonant with the words of our Lord – who teaches us that the wise are a bit reckless towards the things of God, who in fact recognize by their giving that our Lord's party has already started.  
AMEN