

CONSECRATION AND YOU
Matthew 25:1-13
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, November 9, 2014

In seven days we'll be back here to celebrate Consecration Sunday, an opportunity for all of us to reconsecrate ourselves to the reconciling ministry of Jesus Christ.

You may be wondering why we call it "Consecration Sunday" instead of Stewardship Sunday.

My dictionary says, "Consecrate, to make or declare something sacred; to dedicate solemnly to a service or a goal; to solemnly dedicate or set apart for a higher purpose."

On Consecration Sunday you and I will be asked to make a solemn declaration to dedicate ourselves and all we have to a higher purpose, the Kingdom of God and his Christ.

Now, the question is why should we consecrate or declare ourselves to be faithful and obedient stewards of Christ? Another way of putting it, "What's in it for me? Why should I be responsible for supporting the ministry of this church in any way I'm able?"

I appreciate what Bill Blair said last Sunday during his Minute for Stewardship. Bill's task was to encourage you to prayerfully consider increasing your financial giving next year. He focused on the word "responsible," and then broke it down saying your responsibility to God is really based on your response to all your gifts and blessings from above that you've received over your lifetime. The more you become aware of your blessings the more you want to generously respond to God in the spirit of genuine gratitude and thanksgiving.

Isn't that how it works in your relationships with other people? For instance, if someone gives you an unexpected gift, aren't you so thankful and grateful that you're moved to respond in kind? If that's the case, let me suggest it's the same way with God. As soon as you stop taking your gifts from God for granted and start counting your blessings you'll find yourself wanting to generously respond, not to pay God back, you can never do that, but by acknowledging your gratitude by consecrating or dedicating yourself and all you have to God if only because you've come to realize how much God's love has benefited your life.

You remember it was Jesus' goal to gather around him disciples in order to nurture and prepare them to carry on his work after he was gone. Keep in mind, Jesus wasn't just training them to be expendable drones or worker bees to do his bidding. Instead Jesus reached out and gave them his friendship by loving them into the Kingdom of God. Even when they didn't

follow through, and when they went their own way Jesus still loved them. Why? So when they finally came to their senses they would generously respond to his love for them and become responsible to him. And their only motivation to generously respond was that Jesus loved them first. That explains how they finally got their acts together to followed him and die to themselves. Each one gave up his life and handed it over to Christ because they knew their lives were no longer their own, now they belonged to him.

You may be wondering, “How do I get to that place where I can love Jesus as much as Peter, James and John and the rest of the disciples? It would be so much easier if I was one of the twelve, wouldn’t it?”

The short answer is “Maybe not.” Through the power of the Holy Spirit we can be just as motivated to consecrate ourselves to Christ as they were. To help us see how let’s turn to Jesus’ parable about the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids found in Matthew’s Gospel.

The setting takes place just before a wedding with the bridesmaids waiting for the arrival of the groom. Nowadays it’s the groom who waits for the bride, but back then it was the other way around. It’s been my experience that not all weddings start on time, usually due to unforeseen complications. Back in Jesus’ time however there was no set time for the wedding. The groom intentionally kept the bride and wedding guests waiting for hours with his sudden arrival meant to be a joyful surprise. In the meantime everybody waited and waited and waited.

Keep in mind this parable was initially for the first generation of the Church precisely because they were waiting and waiting for the expected, imminent return or second coming of Christ. Jesus himself said before that generation died off he would return in glory, but he also admitted not even he knew when that would be. By the time Matthew’s Gospel was written nearly fifty years had passed. When will he return? That was the big question.

It’s significant Jesus set this parable in the context of a wedding celebration especially since Jesus sometimes cast himself as the groom and the Church as his bride. This is a really lovely analogy. Christ loves the Church as a groom loves his bride. Just as the bride and groom consecrate themselves to each other, Christ consecrates himself to be in a loving covenant relationship with us. Of course we in turn are called upon to be responsible and consecrate ourselves to Christ’s love in kind if only because Christ loved us first.

It’s also important to understand the focus of the parable is spent on what happened before the groom arrived. It was the bridesmaids’ responsibility, there’s that word again, to be ready for the groom’s surprise entrance. As I said, no one involved in the wedding had any idea when the groom would come, so the bridesmaids were chosen to keep watch and wait throughout the day and, if necessary, into the night. Of course, when it became dark the

bridesmaids had the added responsibility of lighting the groom's way so they were also responsible to have on hand an ample backup supply of oil for their lamps.

Well the bridesmaids stood guard and watched throughout the morning and into the afternoon until it was nighttime. Can you hear them wonder?
"What's keeping him, doesn't he know we're waiting for him? Just who does he think he is making us stand here hour after hour?"

Not surprisingly in time all the bridesmaids, both the wise and foolish grow drowsy and fall asleep, leaving us to assume that staying awake while they waited wasn't as important as being prepared for when the groom finally does arrive. They all wake up at the same time, but half of them suddenly realize that since their lamps were lit all this time all their supply of oil was burned out. Thankfully, the other half thought ahead and brought extra oil, but only just enough to light their own lamps. You can almost hear the foolish bridesmaids demanding the others share their oil, but they rightly argue that if they spread out the oil too thin, there wouldn't be enough to keep any light burning throughout the ceremony. So, in a snit the foolish bridesmaids run off the closest Seven Eleven to buy more oil but by the time they return the marriage ceremony was over and the celebration moved into the groom's house. When they start banging on the door expecting to be let in they're shocked to hear the groom say, "Go away. I don't know you."

You may think these poor bridesmaids were treated unreasonably if not cruelly. Why couldn't the selfish bridesmaids share what little they had, isn't that one of the requirements of discipleship, to share with others even if it means having little or none left over for yourself? And what about that unforgiving groom? Sure he was upset that the foolish maids almost ruined his wedding, but doesn't being a Christian mean we're supposed to forgive and forget?"

Make no mistake, we should all readily identify with the foolish bridesmaids if only because all of us come up short more times than we'd like to admit. At the same time even if we remember the times the foolish bridesmaids in our own lives who came up short and let us down we have to be very careful not to become too indignant otherwise we may find out too late our own oil has been consumed by our self-righteous wrath.

Of course we can all remember at least one situation when we had to borrow from others because we weren't sufficiently prepared, but the point of this parable is there are some important things that can never be borrowed, especially our basic responsibilities as disciples of Christ and what should be our generous response for all our blessings that we should never take for granted.

A seminary professor gave a talk about the importance of nurturing the Christian's responsibility to nurture one's own spiritual life. She put an oil lamp on her desk and lit it while she lectured, knowing full well there was only enough oil to keep the lamp lit for just a few

minutes. When the wick sputtered and burned out some of the students giggled not knowing it was intentional. The professor then said, “You see what happens when your oil runs out. Your light goes out and you have nothing left to give. If we Christians run out of oil with nothing left in reserve, how can Jesus call upon us to be his light in the world?”

When the wise bridesmaids refused to share their oil it wasn’t because they were selfish, it was because they were wise. The quality of your neighbor’s spiritual life isn’t transferrable. You can borrow your neighbor’s Bible, but you can’t borrow the time your neighbor meditated on God’s word, nor can you borrow your neighbors’ desire and conviction to be obedient to Christ and give their lives over to him. You have to make your own commitments, you have to find your own way because there are preparations only you can do for yourself through praying the scriptures, making sacrifices of your time and effort and yes, even making sacrifices of your hard earned money.

Throughout the year every Sunday there’s a common theme in my sermons best put by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, “offer yourself up as a living sacrifice which is your spiritual worship.” That means your worship isn’t limited to listening to sermons and anthems, praying together and singing hymns, otherwise you might become a noisy gong clanging symbol. That’s why it’s mandatory that your worship continues throughout the week as you offer yourself up to the higher good by generously sacrificing your time, talent and treasure.

“Oh boy, here it comes,” the cynic may be thinking, “when he says treasure, he means money, my money, he wants my money.”

But that’s not necessarily true. I don’t want your money, but God does want our money. Why? Maybe because putting your trust in your money keeps you from putting your trust in God, and that’s why your giving is good for your soul. What’s more giving away or consecrating a generous portion of your income to ministry means you’re filling up your reserves of oil so your little light can shine even brighter. In short, generous financial giving is good for you because you’re taking one step closer to trusting more of your life to God. But also consider this: when you decide to be more generous in your financial giving, you’ll soon find there’s a ripple effect and find yourself being even responsible in giving away more of your time and talents to the greater good that can only be described as being Christ and his Kingdom.

For Christ’s sake, for your sake, be in prayer, serious prayer, consecrate even more of your life to Christ so when you’re called upon to step up your giving you’ll be wise and prepared to light Christ’s way to the people in our neighborhood and beyond.