

Sermon Notes: November 12th, 2023
Focus: Readiness, Wisdom, and Poison

[Lectionary Readings](#)

Readiness

The New Testament parable of the ten virgins is about readiness now, and at the end of the age.

Wisdom

The Old Testament reading gives us tools for a readiness to see God in the world. I won't talk specifically about the text in the notes but will in the sermon.

Poison

We actively poison our natural wisdom and readiness – personally and corporately.

Ten Virgins At first glance, this is a cautionary tale about preparation and always being ready. If one is not ready, they get shut out. Our American soul is especially terrified of not having it all figured out. The five characters in the parable who did not have enough oil were indeed locked out. This is the original FOMO (fear of missing out) parable. However, all at some point or another, we all have been the foolish bridesmaids; and if being kicked out into the cold is our destiny, we are to be pitied indeed.

Context warning Jesus lived in a very different world than us. In Jesus' day, if you were a Palestinian peasant - you don't work, you don't eat. If their breadwinner dies, the whole family is ruined. This parable really did speak to their immediate experience. Maybe a "full oil lamp" or wise ways look somewhat different now?

Today, if you slack off or come in late to work, you don't put your family into immediate jeopardy. If my child does not get into their first-choice university, it may *feel* like an empty oil lamp and being locked out, but it's an illusion. There is room for mistakes and room to grow.

To be wise is to accept how often our lamps are half full or even empty and how little control we have. This is true not only at a societal level, but also in health, career, and family. For example, have you or a family member had cancer? Did you blame yourself and did your doctor helpfully add that it might be *your* fault because you ate too much red meat, or you weigh too much, or watched too much TV? It seems unwise to me to come up with simple cause and effect; that is its own kind of poison, which I will talk about in a moment.

Wisdom "*When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.*" – *Tao Te Ching*

I know that quote seems a little bizarre at first. Wisdom asks us to stop trying to prepare for things that won't happen, which leaves us unready to respond when the big, real, and unexpected things happen. I am not saying to sit back, disconnect, and do nothing. But active waiting, nimble responsiveness, and generous forgiveness is the way of wisdom, while being addicted to doing is poison – I know first-hand.

We can't make ourselves perfectly holy or righteous. *Moments of foolishness show us the way to God's grace.* God is ever ready to refill our lamps, to guide us through the darkest nights, and send the people we need if we ask, and maybe even if we don't ask. With God by our side, guiding and helping us, we can navigate through any darkness. True wisdom is a gift, not a gym workout.

Some Social Context of the NT parable Virgin bridesmaids symbolized purity and honor in their culture. The community would participate in these events fully, and being prepared for such occasions was a social obligation. Jesus was also addressing his disciples, offering them guidance on how to live in a time of waiting. The parable, set within Jesus' eschatological discourse (Matthew 24-25), serves as a warning to his followers to remain spiritually vigilant in a time of uncertainty, emphasizing the importance of being prepared for the "coming of the Son of Man."

Antidotes and poison in the modern world We are congenitally *unready*. We freak out over events that we have no control over and lose self-control when things of little consequence happen to us. Part of this is systemic and not a personal, moral failing. We live in a culture that demands we be ready for anything, while equipping us for nothing. As great as it is, some core values of our culture are poison: exceptionalism, sneaky racism, and pervasive classism -- all of which makes everyone less ready, less powerful.

Poisons I have been impressed by the work of Tema Okun who wrote a short article as a business consultant. She saw corporate bias and ways to be more highly productive. Years later, in 2021, she built a website that I consider a work of art, full of artwork, poetry and academic depth that expands on the original article. She offers 14 ways that culture poisons us. Her focus is business but can be used more broadly.

For those of you who need to hear it. Yes, I think the United States is awesome. Yes, there are amazing benefits to living here, but that does not preclude critique. There are parts of our culture that train us to internalize attitudes and behaviors that do not serve any of us. <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info>

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| 1. either/or thinking | 5. quantity over quality | 9. power hoarding | 13. right to comfort |
| 2. written word | 6. fear of open conflict | 10. paternalism | 14. perfectionism |
| 3. objectivity | 7. urgency | 11. progress is more | |
| 4. individualism | 8. defensiveness | 12. one right way | |

I won't go through all of them in the sermon, but I am going to talk about some of *my* favorite poisons. Personally, I find myself trapped by perfectionism and individualism. Go to her website and dig into a topic you find interesting. Learn from her, fuss with her perspective, and strive to be wiser, more ready to love.

Todd