

About a year and a half ago, Wayne, Jeff and I attended a conference in Atlanta. After we checked in, we were walking around checking out the vendors and displays and kept seeing jars with different numbers of marbles. When the first session started, the keynote speaker, Reggie Joyner, came on stage with a jar of marbles. He called them legacy marbles and there was one marble for every week of a child's life from birth until they turned 18. And he talked about various children and what their current age was and how many marbles they had left. He was talking about the importance of time.

Today's scripture is about time as well. And I got to wondering how those marbles related to each one of us. So I prepared a couple of jars. This jar has 365 marbles in it. That is one for every day of the year. On January 1, we get a new jar of marbles. This little marble doesn't seem all that important in the grand scheme of things, does it? But when we consider what it means for us individually and to God's kingdom, it is huge. Now look at this second jar, in it are 53 marbles. That is one marble for each day we have left in 2014, including today. We started 2014 with 365 marbles and now only have 53, or really 52 and 1/2 left. What have we done with our marbles? Reggie Joyner said to us at that conference, "When you see how much time you have left, you get serious about the time you have

now. When you see how much time you have left, it affects what you do with the time you have now.”

That’s pretty profound. Yet, as Christians, we do not know how much time we truly have left. And that is what got the five bridesmaids in trouble.

Will you pray with me?

Holy and Loving God, this morning may we truly feel your presence. May we open our ears to hear you, our minds to listen and our hearts to live out your calling for us. Amen.

In our scripture, we hear about ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom to arrive. The custom of that day was that the bridegroom could come at any time, even in the middle of the night, and the bridal party must be ready. It was also the custom that no one be permitted outside after dark without a lamp. Five of the bridesmaids were prepared. They had come to wait with not only a lamp full of oil but they had also brought extra oil with them because there was no set time for when the bridegroom would come. These five are referred to as the wise ones. And then there were the other five bridesmaids, the foolish. They came simply with their lamps with only the oil that was in them. When the bridegroom finally arrives, only the wise are prepared and ready. The foolish asked for oil from the wise ones but they said no. And so the foolish went off to get more oil and missed the bridegroom. And the custom was once the bridegroom arrived the door was

shut and no one else was permitted to enter. And so, the foolish missed the whole wedding and party. The warning Matthew gives us is to “Keep awake therefore for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

This parable from Matthew is an allegory, a story with a hidden meaning for us as Christ’s followers. This story is about our readiness when Christ comes and what we do with our time between now and then. As many of you may know, there are countless references to the church as the bride of Christ and Christ as the bridegroom. We, Christians, are the bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom, awaiting the coming of Christ. But simply waiting is not enough. Both the wise and the foolish were waiting but only the wise were prepared. The main point of the story is that the foolish virgins are not ready when the great moment finally arrives.

The problem was that some of those waiting lacked “oil.” In this parable, some equate the oil to faith. This scripture is warning us that there are certain things which cannot be obtained at the last minute. Think about it, if you are studying for a test as the teacher is walking into the room, it is probably too late for you gain any more knowledge than what you have. Faith is not something we can obtain in an instant or from someone else. It must be our own.

Faith is our hope, our trust and our belief in something, God, that is greater than us and far greater than our understanding. We grow our faith through our participation in God's body, the church. And we grow our faith over time. But just coming to worship and writing a check is not enough. Now, we want you here and we definitely want you to support the church financially, but we also want you to support the ministries of the church with your prayers and your service. And in those ways, you grow your own faith.

You grow your faith by participating in Disciple Bible Study. You dig into the Bible and gain better understanding for yourself in interpreting the scripture but also in who God calls us to be and what God calls us to do. The time involved, 30-34 weeks with about an hour a day of reading, is time well spent. You grow in your faith by teaching a children's Sunday school class. As you help children learn the beloved stories of the Bible, you also learn more about those stories. And you follow the second commandment of loving your neighbor as yourself. Remember what Claude told you a couple weeks ago about how children spell love? T.I.M.E. Time spent with children helps them understand that they are loved, not just by you but also by God. You grow your faith by swinging a hammer or using a paint brush to improve someone's way of living. You

grow your faith when you provide a meal for someone who otherwise would not have anything to eat. These are opportunities that may require time away from work, but it is time spent loving your neighbor and time spent growing your own faith as you grow closer to God.

These are all active ways to grow your faith. They are ways we as a church family participate together in the kingdom. We are not idle. We do not just sit and wait, but we prepare. We need to be ready.

To be “ready” means to be living in the way that Jesus has instructed his disciples to live. Readiness in Matthew is living the life of the kingdom, living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount. Readiness is knowing God and living your life in a way that glorifies him. In order to be ready, we must prepare for the time when Christ will come again.

So when is that time? Well, none of us really know. Oh, through the years there have been a number of individuals and groups who have tried to tell us when that time will be. How many of you remember all of the furor as the end of the 20th century approached. There were those who thought it would be the end time. Harold Camping told us the end would happen on May 21, 2011 and when that didn't happen he changed it to September 29, 2011. And finally he said October 21, 2011. The Mayan calendar had predicted December 21, 2012 as the end date. None of those happened.

There is no human being who knows when the end will come, when the bridegroom, Christ, will come. So we must be ready as if the end is tomorrow and prepare as if it will never come. This issue for Matthew is preparedness in the face of uncertainty. This is making good use of the time you have.

Ordinary followers of Jesus must persevere in their doing and being until Jesus comes, no matter how long the delay may be. It is those who endure to the end who will be saved. Those who are wise will be ready and waiting when Jesus comes; those who are foolish may fail to prepare for the long haul or they may mistakenly think that others can be prepared for them.

Think about those who were not prepared. When the bridegroom came, they first try to borrow oil from the wise bridesmaids. When that doesn't work, they go to buy oil. The futile attempt to buy oil after the arrival of the bridegroom, though historically unrealistic because it was the middle of the night, shows the futility of trying to prepare when it is too late.

You have to make the best use of the time you have. You have to be good stewards of the time you have. You have to be prepared for whatever comes because we do not know how long it will be.

The whole issue of time, of waiting, really hit home with me. I do not like to be late. EVER. I only live 5 minutes from the church but if I know I am supposed to be meeting someone or have to be here for a meeting, I will leave my house anywhere from 15-30 minutes ahead of time. It drives me nuts if I am running late. But there are those who are perpetually late.

I have some friends who are always late. It does not matter what we are doing, they are always late. There is a group of 11 or 12 friends, who do a lot of things together, including social events and book studies. We know who will be 10-15 minutes early, who will be 5 minutes early to on time, who will be 10-15 minutes late and there is the one friend who is always 30 or more minutes late. Two of these ladies are roommates and from time to time several of the others cat sit for them so we have keys to their house. And it is a good thing. A couple months back, we were having a going away party for one of our group members at the home of these ladies. The party was slated to start at 6. So, I arrived around 5:45 as did three others. At 6, two more arrived. The two homeowners still had not arrived. So, we let ourselves in and started getting set up for the party. By 6:15, one of them had made it home and a few minutes later the other showed. They were late for a party that was taking place in their own home. And when they are late, it becomes such a flurry of activity that it causes

anxiety for the whole group. It reminds me of the rabbit in “Alice in Wonderland.”

In that movie, you see the white rabbit run by Alice singing, “I’m late, I’m late, for a very important date. No time to say hello, good-bye, I’m late, I’m late, I’m late.” And as he is singing and running, he is in an almost frenzied state so that when Alice tries to stop him or ask questions all he can say is “I’m late, I’m late, I’m late!”

I do not want any of us to miss out on what God has promised us because we are late or unprepared. Running around talking about being late only causes anxiety. It doesn’t prepare us any better. Now is the time for us to prepare. Now is the time for us to grow our faith, to grow in our commitment to God and one another. Now is the time for us to stand at the ready and be prepared.

Time. It is a gift we receive from God. Each day brings us 24 hours. Each year brings us 365 days. If you remember the lyrics from “Seasons of Love,” the song from “Rent”, you know that is 525, 600 minutes we have each year. 525,600 minutes of time to know God better and be prepared. Each of those minutes is an opportunity for us to grow our faith, share our faith and live our faith.

We do not want to be the foolish who come unprepared, who wait until the last minute, and when we try to trim our wicks and light our lamps, nothing happens. In those times when faith is tested, we begin to distinguish wisdom from foolishness. The issue has to do with responsible behavior *in the meantime*. After all, it is not the coming of the bridegroom that makes some wise and some foolish; it merely reveals who is.

The foolish have only enough oil for their own timetable. But we are on God's timetable. We have to be at the ready. Do we have time? Who knows? But we have to be ready anyway. We must know who God is. We must be living and practicing our faith daily. The last part of this scripture is very similar to Mark 13:32-33, which says, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come."

This scripture from Matthew also tells us about time and the need to always be prepared. This scripture warns us that there are certain things which cannot be borrowed. We cannot borrow a relationship with God; we must possess it for ourselves. We cannot borrow someone else's faith. We must have faith of our own and it must be strong enough to sustain us no matter how long we wait.

In 2014, we have gone from 365 marbles to 53. That is a lot of time spent, a lot of time gone. How have you spent that time? What are you going to do with the 53 marbles, the 53 days you have left in this year? “When you see how much time you have left, you get serious about the time you have now.” What are you going to do with your time? Now is the time to be prepared because we truly do not know how much time we have left. Do you have enough oil, enough faith, to see you through? Amen.