

FROM BEAR CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

On Being Lucky

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Matthew 25:1-13

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A mother and her son were on their way home to their winter cabin. As they drove up a winding and icy road they met a vehicle coming down the road. Both vehicles tried to avoid each other and then stop. Both vehicles ended up stuck in opposite ditches. It turned out that the other vehicle held a mother and children who were friends of the family. It took an hour for the friends to help each other back on the road. Then they went on their ways.

Just before the mother and son reached their cabin they saw a giant avalanche come roaring down the mountain, destroying everything in its path, including their cabin. Had they not nearly run into friends, had they not been stuck in the ditch, they would be dead. All of us have, at some time or another, been so lucky.

We were on a two lane highway outside Missoula, Montana and pulling our sailboat. I was driving, Vickie was in the passenger seat, Erika and Johanna were young enough that they were strapped into car seats. As we rounded a corner we saw a very large RV passing a very large truck, coming straight at us. There was no place to go so I turned off the road to the right. We dropped a couple of feet onto a road under construction, parallel to the old road. I stopped the car. We prayed. We had been lucky in several ways. We had left the road just where the new road was closest. We had not plunged into the river. None of the heavy equipment was parked where we landed.

This is not the only time I have been lucky. I was lucky in my early life not to have spent time in jail or a mental institution. I have been lucky in my marriage, in my children, in my family, in my friends, in my job. I am lucky to be here with you. Two Bishops and several District Superintendents had to agree that moving from the Yellowstone Conference to the Pacific Northwest Conference was a good idea. I truly have lost count of all my luck.

And there in lies the problem for the foolish maidens. They lost count of and forgot their luck. They did not bring enough memory of the luck they have had in their lives so that they were not prepared for the next moment of luck. They had forgotten that the bridegroom, whom we can call luck, or divine providence, or synchronicity, or serendipity, or even Jesus, can come at any moment and so they weren't ready.

It is a strange and sad part of our human condition that we simply forget how lucky/blessed we have been, how often, or even when, the kingdom of heaven has been with us or come upon us.

It is a part of our human weakness to forget the previous graces which have blessed us.

Dan Millman tells the story of little Sachi:

*Soon after her brother was born, little Sachi began to ask her parents to leave her alone with the new baby. They worried that like most four-year-olds, she might feel jealous and want to hit or shake him, so they said no. But she showed no signs of jealousy. She treated the baby with kindness and her pleas to be left alone with him became more urgent. They decided to allow it.*

*Elated, she went into the baby's room and shut the door, but it opened a crack - enough for her curious parents to peek in and listen. They saw little Sachi walk quietly up to her baby brother, put her face close to his and say quietly, "Baby, tell me what God feels like. I'm starting to forget."*

We forget and so run out of oil for our lamps as we wait for the coming of the bridegroom, our luck and our way to the party, the kingdom of heaven.

There are some obvious things we can do to keep our lamps burning and our eyes open. The first thing we can do is remember how often the bridegroom has come before. This is why we open worship here with a counting of blessings. We can count our blessings often, or even write them down. It is our grateful memory which leads us to both believe and trust that the bridegroom is indeed coming. It is our memory of luck past that keeps our hopes for grace in the future alive.

"But remembering and trusting is so hard," you might say. There is bad luck to remember also. Not every family escapes the avalanche or the car wreck. Not every ill person gets well. It is when luck seems at its worst that it is hardest for us to remember that we are surrounded by the constant love of God.

John Wesley, Methodism's founder, knew all about bad luck. From a failed ministry in Georgia to a failed marriage, Wesley had problems. He had bad luck with his step-children and with many of his ministers and adherents. There were times of failed finances and sometimes poor health. Still, in spite of all the darkness he experienced, Wesley strongly encouraged Methodists to celebrate the bad luck of their lives as if it were God's good luck, God's divine providence. For Wesley saw, as did the Apostle Paul, that in the tragedies of life God works good.

I will use some of my own bad luck as an example. I am an alcoholic. I didn't choose to be an addict, it chose me. I am probably alcoholic because it takes so darn little for me to fall into depression and anxiety. I didn't choose my biochemical makeup that makes this so, it is just my bad luck. But my bad luck has been an essential part of my good luck.

My good luck starts with the good luck of Bob and Bill. Bob and Bill were alcoholics who had tried all the treatments of their day and were still miserable and making misery. By luck, Bob and Bill came to know each other, one as doctor, and the other as patient. By luck they stumbled upon a program of faith in God's love for them that led them to healing. And by luck Bob and Bill decided to trust God for their recovery, to support each other, and to support others. It was Bob and Bill who started AA out of their bad luck. It is now the good luck of millions, including me. And I got lucky in my disease because I had their support and I could become support to others. My disease helped define the good of my life.

In God's divine providence, great wounds and weaknesses become strength for God's glory. It is true for the immigrants who first fled the persecution and poverty of their home lands to the wilderness of America and began this great nation of ours. It is true of writers, musicians, philosophers, and scientists who out of their own suffering bad luck have made great gifts of beauty and healing.

The first thing we can do then to keep our lamps full and ready is to remember that God has come to us in the worst of our past and that God will surely come to us in whatever is our future.

The second thing we can do to keep our lamps burning is to stay alert. Bob and Bill were not the first alcoholics to be surrounded by a God who would lead them to serenity. But they were the first to truly be awake to God in their recovery and then share it as ministry. Those who are awake to God inspired luck can take advantage of it. Seat belts and air bags are the gifts of those who have been lucky in automobile accidents. Most modern medicine comes from those who have suffered, or had loved ones suffer, and by luck survived and with great persistence, large amounts of lamp oil burnt late into many nights, saw the luck when it came. So stay awake for you never know when you are going to get a bit of God luck.

The final part of being lucky is joining in the party. When the bridegroom does come we go into the banquet and we celebrate. When our God luck happens then we dance and sing, eat and drink to be merry. How often have we dismissed a God moment, an unexpected great fortune, as "just" luck? It is not just luck; it is God's care for us. To dismiss the coming of God to our aid as something insignificant is to miss the kingdom of heaven in our lives.

When God comes bringing gifts it is time to party. When the avalanche did not take a family, it was time for a prayer of gratitude and a party. When Vickie, Erika, Johanna and I were safe from the truck and RV it was time for a prayer and a party.

When the dark days of depression found relief in God, friends, and medication, it was time for a prayer and a party. When in death we encounter a mysterious peace and joy it is time for a prayer and a party.

Do this exercise with me. For a week, count your God luck, count the blessings you have in your life. Remember the evidence of God showering you with good luck. Luck could be anything; it doesn't have to be dramatic like avoiding an accident. It might be the home or country in which you live. It might be a grandchild's or friend's recovery. It might be a phone call that you needed. It might be something small like finding your car keys, or turning the stove off when you left for worship. Count your luck, your divine gifts of good fortune, and every time you notice even the least bit of luck, add a finger to your count.

When you run out of fingers, make some blessing ticks on a piece of paper. And when you come to worship next week I will ask for blessings and you will be able to shout out a number, the number of times you have noticed your luck, your blessings in but one week's time.

So here is the plan to be ready for the coming of the bridegroom. First, remember that the bridegroom has come before and will come again. Secondly, by your memory stay alert, ready for the coming of God's grace to your life. And finally, when indeed the Holy Spirit of great good fortune comes upon you say a prayer of gratitude and celebrate the Kingdom of Heaven with you. For soon and very soon, the bridegroom will come and there will be a great banquet, a wedding feast of peace and joy, because God loves us and saves us. And by the count of your blessings your lamps will be full of oil and you will be able to enter the party. This is the promise and fact of Christ resurrected among us. It is our way to prayer and heaven.

Amen and Shalom.