

“Boy Scout Theology”

A lot of people seem to subscribe to a theology that comes, not from the Scriptures, but from the Boy Scout Manual. I have nothing essential against this manual and while scouting has fallen on hard times because of volumes of scandals; millions of boys have found the Boy Scout Manual to be a formative, helpful guide to growing up in a complex world. Millions of girls have found similar guidance through the Girl Scout Manual. I suspect that many people today regard both manuals as outdated, probably sexist, and maybe even a little naive.

Both these manuals contain all kinds of detailed information about various matters, ranging from tent assembly to merit badges — but I am most concerned this morning about two basic tenets: The scout motto which is, as we all know, *“Be prepared,”* and one of the goals expected of every scout, *“Do a good deed every day.”*

Again, nothing inherently wrong with either of these tenets. Preparedness is a healthy attitude — perhaps we wish that more people would learn to plan and be able to see beyond the next day’s diversions. And who could be opposed to good deeds? Good deeds are fundamental to an ordered society. While the popular image of helping little old ladies across the street has its detractors, and has certainly been the object of ridicule from cartoons and comics, we do recognize that society is a better place when people do things to help others.

But as praiseworthy, helpful, and advancing of social harmony as both these scouting tenets may be, they are not Biblical truth. Christian theology cannot be digested into the motto, *“Be prepared.”* The heart of the Gospel is not, *“Do a good deed every day.”*

The parable in today’s Gospel might lead us to conclude otherwise. We may think that the message of Jesus’ story of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids is, *“Be prepared.”* Jesus does conclude this parable with the admonition, *“So always be ready ...”* Is not that just about the same as,

“Be prepared”? Is it not common knowledge that doing good works is at the heart of Christian teaching? ***“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,”*** Jesus taught. Our behaviors may often suggest that we comprehend this as *“Do it to others as good as they do it to you,”* or *“Do it to others before they do it to you,”* but we do accept as normative for Christian living the notion that we need to do good things for others.

That is reinforced by other statements from what might be called the Christian philosophy: ***“Love your neighbor as you love yourself”*** (Jesus). ***“Let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith”*** (St. Paul). *“We should fear and love God that we may not hurt not harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need”* (Luther).

Preparedness and do-goodism are not the central tenets of the Christian Gospel — they are not even the primary message of the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. In fact, this parable, rather than confirming the notion that faith is primarily doing good things and being ready, actually repudiates those notions.

Hidden within the notion of being prepared is the idea that God is out to get us, so you’d better watch out. *“He’s making a list; he’s checking it twice; he’s gonna find out who’s naughty or nice.”* Who’s coming to town? A lot of people think that’s God coming. You’ve probably seen the bumper sticker: *“Jesus is coming, and boy is he ticked off!”* Or a more recent incarnation, the billboards that announce, *“Don’t make me come down there!”* — God. I cannot tell you how much I loathe those bumper stickers and those billboards.

Where does this notion come from, this idea that God is punishment and doom, anger and outrage? There are stories in the Bible in which God’s wrath is revealed: Sodom and Gomorrah; the Flood; the plagues on Egypt. Can you think of many others? Maybe three or four more— but somehow we’ve managed to turn these into the dominant motif of the Bible. I say “We” did that — the Church. So much of what people hear about religion and Christian teaching is found on “religious” television,

where the dominant message has very little to do with the Gospel.

I watched a lot of television when I was in the hospital and then, when I got home, I forced myself to watch what is advertised on Sundays as religious broadcasting. It is almost impossible to find anything that resembles the Gospel on television. It amazes me how little of the New Testament finds its way into supposedly Christian [I shudder to use the phrase] preaching; there is this pastiche of Old Testament ritualism, First Century apocalypticism, and contemporary western civilization avarice.

Here's the message I heard over and over again: God has an anointing (translation: "financial boon") in store for those who obey His commands (translation: "send money to the ministry providing the broadcast"). He condemns everything in our society today, and is just itching for the time when He can come down to give the world a good punch in the nose. If you want to avoid that divine haymaker, get yourself right (pay very close attention to that idea — get yourself right!), and God will give you an abundance: a new car, a new home, a new job. This is God's promise to His people. To the rest God has promised nothing but pain and agony, despair, people dying everywhere.

Ought we then be surprised that people all over the map think that God has arranged things in such a way that, if you do some worthy activities, there will be a reward? God is promoted as an angry and capricious parent — and how do you placate an angry parent? You do good things that will please. Except, you cannot please or appease an angry parent. Nothing is ever good enough.

Just think about what this says about God. God is chronically peeved. God can never be convinced to consider us acceptable. God is arbitrary, unpredictable, unstable. God is hate — God is fury — God is dangerous. Ya think something may be wrong with this picture? Is this the dominant motif of the Bible?

Let's examine this parable. Ten girls are invited to a wedding feast — what does this tell you? None of these girls is on the outside looking in.

There is no question about their acceptance — they are, every last one of them, invited. This supposedly unpredictable God, it turns out, is predictable in just one thing — an unmitigated love for and acceptance of the human race.

The whole world is invited — and look what they are invited to: not some straight-laced, insipid tea-and-watercress-sandwiches soiree with Lord and Lady Mundane — we're invited to the wedding feast of His Son! God is God of the party! God is not the bean counter so many make Him out to be, keeping score, making lists, getting even. God is celebration — it's about time His Church gave witness to that!

Five of these young women Jesus labels as foolish; five He calls wise — but look carefully at the wisdom and folly on display. What is foolish about the foolish? They seem lack one thing — a long view. If you're invited to an afternoon celebration, which you think may last past sundown, isn't it sufficient prudence to bring along a filled lantern? In our current period of pandemic upheaval, how many of you have stockpiled canned goods, bottled water, extra batteries and candles and kerosene lanterns? No? Foolish, foolish, foolish!

Why are these girls labeled foolish? Because they forget a simple rule: In this world something always goes wrong. “...*the bridegroom was late...*” — yeah, tell me about it. For two millennia, the Church has been waiting for this Bridegroom to appear — this has been quite a delay! What's infuriating is, we don't know the reason for the delay. And now that it's been so long, it begins to feel like the delay is permanent — that He will never come in our lifetimes.

Given those circumstances, are not the foolish those with extra oil? In the first decade of the Church's life, the expectation of Christ's immanent return was one of the things that enlivened its outreach and growth. But as the decades became centuries and the centuries became millennia, are there any bridesmaids, wise or foolish, still waiting?

The old exegesis equates the oil with the deeds of God's people — the

meaning of the parable was obviously (so it was said) that we should have a stockpile of good deeds to trot out when the Bridegroom finally does appear. But that interpretation, first articulated by the Church Father Tertullian in the Second Century, simply cannot hold up under the light of the Gospel. Indeed, the parable makes it plain that it is faith, not works, that must be at the heart of the Church's life.

The extra oil must be understood as faith that holds on for decades, centuries, millennia — aeons, if needs be. What makes the foolish maids foolish is a faith that is short-visioned, and not ready for the long haul — a foolish faith expects life to be predictable, happy, satisfying, and wonderful. Such faith is no faith at all, because it is a faith in something that is not, and can never be, real. The oil of the wise maidens is the faith of those who realize that life is filled with vagaries, setbacks, disappointments, and disasters — and yet holds on to be ready when the cry comes: ***“The bridegroom is coming! Come and meet him!”***

But there is something very disturbing in the parable that we cannot dance around or ignore. Even though the themes of the parable are celebration and faith, there is a dark cloud cast over the parable: the response of the five wise maidens when the five foolish maidens ask, ***“Give us some of your oil, because our lamps are going out.”*** The caring, loving, “Christian” response should be what? *“Oh, you need oil? Of course we can, we must, share.”*

It disturbs us mightily when the wise maidens respond, ***“No, the oil we have might not be enough for all of us.”*** What stingy, self-centered, closefisted snobs! How dare they not share! How can Jesus call them wise? He calls them wise because they have insight into twin fallacies at work in the world and in the Church.

In the parable the primacy of faith is set forth in a way that addresses an objection that seems always to be lurking within those of us who hear these stories from Jesus. The objection is this: Almost always, when salvation by grace through faith alone is seriously preached, somebody wants to object that it has all been made too easy.

Assuming falsely that faith is simply a kind of intellectual assent to a set of propositions, we go on to conclude that the general reaction of the human race to salvation by grace through faith will be an equally intellectual reaction of indifference. In part because we may be inclined to join that chorus, we are afraid that the world will say, *“If all the real work of salvation has already been done and the only thing we have to do is believe it, why should we bother trying to be good, kind, or loving? If the world is saved in spite of its sins, what’s to stop us from going right on doing rotten things?”*

Those are really two issues. The first, that faith is just intellectual assent, will not stand in the light of the Biblical witness. Faith is not a proposition. Faith is the living out of a trust-relationship with a person. If faith were something only in our heads, then we might well conclude that it had no implications for what we might do with our hands and feet or with any of our other members or faculties. But since nothing is ever simply in our heads — since we will always, as long as we live, be doing something — the idea that faith can be solely a proposition is a false conclusion. In truth, it is not faith that saves us; it is God in Christ who saves. But because faith leads us to stop contradicting what He has done, it becomes the only instrument of salvation we need to lay our hand to.

The second issue is likewise a fallacy. To ask, *“If the world is already saved in spite of its sin, what’s to stop people from sinning?”* is to misunderstand the nature of sin. Sin is not something the human race has any choice about. The occasional sin (small *s*), we might manage to stop: some of us might avoid this lie or that misbehavior. But none of us will ever be able to avoid that trust in ourselves — and that distrust of anyone else — that lies at the root of the world’s problems.

These twin fallacies of faith in self and unfaith in others are as irremovable by human effort as they are unpardonable by human good will. If they are ever to be removed or pardoned, it will be only by God’s gift. But that gift will neither force us to be better nor enable us to go on being worse; it is simply a fact, to be trusted or not as we choose. It is a

free gift, and it aims to elicit only a free response of faith. Without constraining or condoning anything, it just hands us a new creation and invites to live as if we trusted it.

This goes to the heart of the Biblical view of history. In the Bible, the course of the world and the course of God's actions in the world are like an arrow shot toward a target (or the alternate image of a river in its unstoppable movement toward the sea), but it is not like a planet endlessly pursuing an unchanging, circular course.

This linear view of history is manifest in the notion of judgment. In a circular system, there is no possibility of judgment; everything is mere repetition of what has come before. But in a linear system, everything is going somewhere — there is a goal, a purpose to every action.

So it is with the Biblical view of history in general, and of Jesus' parables in particular. They are not about a system of static recurrences in which time goes on forever — where there is always, by the rules of the system, time for a second chance at everything, in which a step taken too soon or a move made too late can always be remedied the next time around. They are about a world in which too early or too late can be fatal, crashing mistakes — in which there is only one chance for anything. Consequently the response of five wise maidens is not uncharitable or uncaring, it is wise.

There will come a time when all that remains will be the question: *“Did we trust Him?”* Not *“What did you do?”* or *“How well, or often, or earnestly, or enthusiastically, did you do it?”* It will be the question of faith when the Bridegroom appears. Jesus does not bid us to be prepared by making sure that we have the flotsam and jetsam of our likes in order. Jesus does not ask us to get ready by setting up a plausible scoresheet of exemplary behaviors that will impress His socks off. He asks us to be ready simply by trusting Him.

And think about it — He's been delayed for more than two millennia, and He told us that He was going to prepare a place for us. For 2000+ years,

He has been making ready the wedding feast. Trust Him — this is going to be some celebration! Come on in and party!

Amen.