

**Sermon for Nov. 8, 2020 by Pastor Hanberry "Bring your A Game"
TUCC Matt. 25:1-13 (Ser20-43)**

I gotta warn you. This is a very simple sermon; simple but with the possibility of learning something about ourselves that might enrich us this morning. Let me begin with a story – a story that Fred Craddock, one of the great preachers and teachers of preachers in the land: *I recall some years ago in a church I was visiting on a Sunday afternoon, a van pulled up in the church parking lot, and a bunch of young people got out. They looked like thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, maybe up to eighteen years old. I think there were ten or twelve young people who belonged to that church. They got out with bedrolls. It was the awfulest looking bunch of kids you've ever seen, something like the cats would drag in. They were really in bad shape. I said, "What is this?" They had just returned from a work mission. They named the place where they went. In one week, those young people, along with other young people, had built a little church for a community. They were beat. Aw, they looked terrible.*

They were sitting on their bags out there waiting for their parents to come. I said to one of the boys, I said, "You tired?" And he said, "Whew – am I tired!" Then he said, "This is the best tired I've ever felt." A simple story of Faith in action – Paul could never accuse those tired, ragged looking young people of being IDLE... "This is the best tired I've ever felt."

Over the past 30+ years, I've led workgroups to all sorts of places: youth groups to Tenn for a summer Group.com home repair project; 20 adult work groups to Honduras + 1 youth group; home repairs in Miss after

Hurricane K. Habitat for Humanity work weeks in Baltimore. In groups like these folks don't always start out with their A Game: some come tired, anxious, homesick before we even leave the church parking lot. But most start out excited and energetic with high expectations...Logan Nave being one of those. Just like Fred Craddocks story, we almost always came home with the best tired ever....

When I was a runner, I was often asked why I would run 7 miles a day or ride my bike 50 miles, and I have often said, flippantly, "it feels so good when I'm done." You just can't feel that good unless you do the ride or the run. I think that's the case with our sharing of ourselves, with the giving of our lives in being disciples of Jesus Christ. --- the Discipleship that follows faith is not easy...Faith is not easy. Giving of ourselves is a challenge. Doing all the things that Jesus sets before us - by his life and story and by the stories he tells -- demands something significant of us.

But for it to work...for the faith to grow, you've got to bring your A Game, you know: your being eager or willing to do something new or challenging. You've got to be ready for what will come...and often come as a gift. The ten bridesmaids in Matthew 25, verse 1-13 story has five who come prepared...smart the text says. And five who are not prepared...not ready...maybe have their C game on...maybe no game at all. When the big event happens: the bridegroom comes in the night the five smart A game bridesmaids were prepared...they were ready.

Back when I was at Trinity UCC in Waynesboro Pa several summers I led a week long backwoods, tent-cooking our own meals on an open fire kind of camp for 12 teens. This was at the Penn Central Conference Hartman Center summer camp. Normally all the summer camp kids stayed in cabins with hot showers, beds, etc. We were out in woods on our own...no electricity...and the kids were told to leave any electronic stuff home...like hair dryers. Well the 2nd year of this camp it rained all the time...about the 2 or 3 day I discovered all the 6 girls had hairdryers. If we had had electricity, they could have dried out their gear and bodies with the H dryers. When you see a hairdryer in a camp like that you know they're just the tip of the ice berg...they had all sorts of other stuff that didn't help in our wet lives. The others without electronics had brought extra tarps and water proof sleeping bags. I discovered the ones who came prepared were also willing to cook in the rain and help secure our campsite. The brought their A game. The ones with the hairdryers were pretty much ill-equipped in all ways to support this drenched camp of teens.

At the end of the week the A game group was tired...really tired - the very best tired of their lives. The others - just tired of the whole experience. Just like the 5 silly bridesmaids in the gospel, these silly girls with the hairdryers had locked themselves out of the wedding feast...the camp party.

They sacrificed their potential feast by only focusing on their own petty needs. They were not ready for the coming of that next great event in their lives that would bring them joy or engagement with the gift of the summer

camp. I pray that as we live into this challenging time coming to the end of 2020, you find the courage to live well into these days...to put on your A Game, expecting the next big thing to happen that when it does you receive it as a gift and you can give God the praise. Amen.

Sermon: “Real Faith is About Relationships”

The Message from God's Word

It was always wonderful. The picnic tables were pushed together; the table cloths were plastic—usually blue, red and white checked—and the food stretched seemingly forever. It was a Foss family reunion. My father came from a family of six children. Those six children brought with them, over time, seventeen grandchildren and, when you added spouses and grandparents...well, you had a tribe! And each family brought potatoes or salad, chicken and hamburgers, homemade bread or rolls, gravy, fresh vegetables and pies and cakes galore! The laughter and talking seemed to fill the county park. While we ate, we caught up on the family news and shared tidbits of our real lives. And when the meal was finished, the children scattered to play and the parents talked long and loud.

Beloved people of God, real faith is about relationships. The picture in the book of Revelation is not of solitary individuals but of an eternal community. God created us for community. The eternal plan of our loving Creator is for us to be in relationship with God and others. This picture of God’s future is all about community. We read: After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white... (*vs. 9*). When the dust settles and humanity stands before the throne of Christ, it will be a multitude. When the curtain closes on this season of human history and opens on forever—it will be a family reunion! And the loud laughter and shouting that I experienced in my childhood won’t hold a candlestick to the noise that will echo throughout the heavens. Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen (*vs. 12*).

The promise of God is that we have a forever family! For some of us this is an answer to prayer. We have dreamt of a family that was typified by joy—not anger and resentment. Some of us have longed for a family that embodied the love of Jesus—not the demands of abusive parents. Some of us have prayed for the possibility of a large family where we would be welcomed and loved—not isolated and judged. When the dust of this mortal sphere settles...those who trust in Jesus Christ will be surrounded in relationships of love and joy and acceptance. It will be a family reunion that will rival the Foss family’s joyous chaos—and Jesus will be at the head table.

God has your invitation ready. Are you longing for love—the invitation is yours. Are you hoping for a time of reunion with loved ones that have already passed on—the invitation is yours. Do you look forward to meeting those you most love and some that you only wished

you could know—the invitation is yours.

Beloved people of God, you can catch a glimpse of forever in the here and now. A few years ago, I went to a Thompson Family Reunion in Lake Mills, Iowa. The Thompson family are my relations on my father's mother's side. When we arrived with my Dad, we met relatives I can't recall ever meeting before. But I had the joy of reconnecting with my cousin, Alice. Alice was four or five years younger than me and seemed shy when I grew up. But I remember talking with her and spending time with her in our teen years. At that reunion, Alice told me that she always liked me because, unlike other older cousins, I took the time to listen to her and treat her like she was interesting. That surprised me—because she was interesting! And, my experience with my older cousins was that they at least tolerated me when I tagged along. I share that story because, no matter how loving an extended family may be, it is always just a shadow of our eternal family. I believe that our earthly family is a foretaste of the family this text speaks of. It is, however, only a foretaste. No matter how wonderful our family may be, it is still made up of faulty human beings. In families, hurtful things are said; we get angry at those we love and walk away in rejection; we can take advantage of one another. But when love, nonetheless, emerges—like in those forgotten conversations with my cousin, Alice—it is a promise of what God will give us in eternity. Family—especially the family of faith—is one of the great gifts of God to meet our needs for relationship...but it is always imperfect.

Faith-filled friendships are also gifts that point to our eternal family. If you have ever had a small group of praying friends support you in a time of need, you know what I am talking about. Teens, if you have been a part of our ministry and had a small group truly listen to you and then pray for you, you know how powerful Christian friends can be. Adults, if you have ever had friends that you could go to at any time, with any need, and they'd hear you, talk honestly and openly with you and then pray with you, then you know what I am talking about. I urge any of you who have not experienced such Christian friendship to risk joining a small group—when it works it is a taste of heaven. And Church can be the gift of a forever family if you are open. This picture of eternity in Revelation seven is of the Church gathered in worship. I can't tell you what it means to be a part of an authentic worshipping community—unless you have been apart from it you can't imagine its power. When we come together to worship the “God who alone is God”, we have the possibility of true community. But it requires suspending your judgments of others in the Church; you'll have to accept your own sinful humanity and then extend that to others; and you'll have to trust God's Holy Spirit to be at work.

These are the three primary ways that we can experience a small part of what St. John describes for us in this wonderful picture of heaven. What about you? Are you willing to see the Church gathered as a family reunion? Would you be willing to take a piece of this church

and be a part of a small group? Can you pray that your earthly family will more fully embody our eternal family—and will you work to make it so?

God calls you and me to health-giving relationships. “Until I came to Prince of Peace I didn’t know that people could care so much,” she said. “I’m not used to people going out of their way to help. I grew up in a family where we were expected to do it on our own. Asking for help was a sign of weakness. But when I went I lost my husband, struggled with my kids and was feeling hopeless and worn out, some of the people of this church reached out to me. I can’t tell you what a difference it made!”

A tear began to slide down her cheek. “I’m sorry,” she said. “But I get so emotional. This church was my life saver... well, Jesus Christ was my life saver, but this Church was his presence and love for me.” Then she smiled... “I just wanted to tell you that and thank you for Prince of Peace.” And I smiled and said, “Yes, this is a great church. But don’t thank me. I’m just a small part of it. Thank the Holy Spirit for it. Only God can do this.”

There is a spiritual truth that needs to be said in our time of individualism: The Congregation is God’s chosen instrument for renewing and blessing our world. Government, no matter how well-intentioned, cannot do it. Social service agencies, no matter how well staffed or directed, cannot do it. God has chosen you and me to be partners in eternal blessing. That’s what that woman experienced at Prince of Peace. I cannot tell you how many storied like that I have heard. If you wonder what a difference a church can make, just listen...then imagine if Prince of Peace and other wonderful churches just disappeared. It is up to you and me to multiply these stories and see that this Church lives for and embraces God’s world.

You and I are called to be Christ’s heart and hands. So, I ask you to be Christ’s church for one another. Today we have first time worshippers with us. It is likely that we have some who identify with Prince of Peace who are worshipping with us for the first time in awhile today. We may have members and friends with us today who aren’t sure that they want to continue at Prince of Peace. They are wondering if God will meet them here today. God is here...and it is up to us to show that to one another. So, we are going to take some time for a bit of “heavenly chaos”—we’re going to embody that family reunion that John shows us in our text. Please, take the next few minutes and get the names of just three people you don’t know and tell them that you are glad they are in church today. Let’s do that now. Amen.