

“Preaching with Dolphins”

Matthew 25:1-13

Sermon notes from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Matt Matthews

Rodger Nishioka tells the story about how he was preaching outside at a youth event on the South Carolina coast. He stood on the beach with his back to the ocean and his face to the crowd. Rodger is an excellent preacher. Some of you have heard him at the Montreat Youth Conferences, at General Assemblies, at Seminary convocations, Big Tent Events, and other events around our denomination.

But on this day, he had lost his preacherly connection with his congregation. He thought he had lost his touch. The kids and their leaders kept looking past him, around him, beyond him. Finally, he turned around and looked at the ocean. It was filled with dolphins cresting and playing in the waters near the shore.

His well-written, well-planned, and well-delivered sermon was over. He couldn't compete with dolphins. Sometimes—it would seem—God interrupts our plan with something better. God's grace often comes as a surprise.

The point of our text today is that God's grace always, always, always comes. Often, we don't know when. Sometimes it comes as a surprise. We are caught off-guard. Sometimes it comes soon. Sometimes it comes late. But God's grace always, always comes. Jesus, the groom, is coming to the wedding. His union with the church is spoken of in terms of a marriage. And the groom is on the way. The church can count on it.

The question is not *if* God's grace will come, it's when. When will God's grace be made known to us? Maybe it's here right now, all around, in a through the bounty of this very moment, but when will I notice? The point of this text is that God's grace always, always, always comes.

A question this text asks us, the one Jesus wants his friends to think about, is this: “Are we ready?” Are we prepared for God's grace?

I suppose you can never be ready for the surprise of dolphins breaking the waves on a sunny Sunday morning. Though God's grace can always, always, always be counted upon, God's grace can't always be (ever be?) predicted or scripted.

But certain things can be planned for, and this is Jesus' point.

We know God's grace is often revealed in relationships. So, what are we doing to nurse relationships with each other? What are we doing to widen our circle of friends? What are we doing to extend our reach beyond our own neighborhood? Faithfulness to these holy matters opens us to what the spirit will do when we gather. If we don't cook the meal, we'll have nothing to share. If we don't attend the dinner, we pass on our opportunity to grow together in Jesus Christ.

One way we could translate this text is: “You snooze, you lose.”

Don't lose, Jesus is urging his friends. Don't miss out. Show up. Be prepared.

We know God's grace is often revealed in acts of generosity. We open ourselves to this grace by giving of ourselves, our talent, our treasure. Don't miss out, Jesus urges his friends in the New Testament. Nobody ever got a blessing by building more barns to stockpile more stuff. But people's lives have been flipped up-side-down in wonderful ways in the sharing of themselves with others.

We know God's grace is often revealed in nature. We don't see the glory of a sunset from the vantage point of the hills unless we hike to the top of the hill. We don't feel the power of the wind unless we go outside and stand in it. We aren't restored by creation unless we go explore it. And you can't be surprised by dolphins in the water unless you stroll along the shore.

Don't miss out, Jesus urges. Are you prepared? Are you ready? Are you keeping watch? Are you open to being shattered and restored and used and spent for good? Are you flexing the muscles of faith by praying, and by serving, and by giving, and by using your mental floss, and by asking God, and by listening for God, and by worshipping God?

Do you have enough oil for your lamps?

If not, it's not too late. Let's go now, go quickly, and fill up our lamps? It's not too late, but let's go now.