

Sunday: Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Date: November 8, 2020

Text: Matthew 25:1-13

Title: Be Ready.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

As we approach the end of the church year, our lectionary turns to contemplation of Jesus' teachings on the time when he returns to judge all people. As Jesus teaches the disciples on the Mount of Olives during the week of his death, the topic turns to when the Son of Man will return. From Matthew 24:36 through our parable today and the parable of the talents next week, Jesus is teaching that no one knows the time of the return of Jesus. No one knows the hour of his return. For that reason, people must be ready. In Matthew 24:44 Jesus says, "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." The sense of Jesus' words is that you must keep being ready. It is an on-going, always active readiness. With this in mind, we approach the parable Jesus uses to flesh out his point.

There were ten young maidens, girls of marriageable age, who were excited to attend a wedding celebration. Invited by the bridegroom, the ladies eagerly prepared for the day. They dressed in their finest wedding festival garments. They gathered together to await the announcement that the festivities were beginning. All of the ladies brought a lamp with them, but only five of them brought additional oil with them to replenish the flame, if necessary. When the bridegroom is delayed, the excited girls become tired and all of them fall asleep. At around midnight, the excited cry rings out that the bridegroom has arrived. Awakened by the announcement, they all relight their lamps, but having used up the original oil supply, they needed replenishing. The five maidens who brought extra oil, were able to refill their lamps, light them and head out to meet the groom. The five who did not bring extra oil, asked for some of the oil brought by the others, but there was not enough for them. So, the "foolish" virgins were told to go to the market and buy some oil.

When the bridegroom arrived, the five ready virgins went into the wedding feast and the door was closed. Later the unprepared women knocked at the door, but the bridegroom would not open the door, saying that “I do not know you.”

Jesus concludes the parable by connecting it to his theme of readiness for the return of the Son of Man saying, “Keep watching, therefore, because you do not know the day or the hour.” (Matthew 25:13).

Jesus began this parable saying, “Then the kingdom of heaven **will be** like . . .” He draws the disciple attention forward through the now of the kingdom of heaven to the end of this present age. He delivers a message as to the final events of this earthly kingdom and the events of the final judgment.

The Kingdom of heaven parable Jesus tells in our Gospel reading today is one that can leave us scratching our heads. Part of the reason for our difficulties with many of Jesus’ parables is that he would include facets in the story that were out of the ordinary. For example, in the parable of the sower, the seed that is sown is cast on areas that no reasonable farmer would sow. Or in the parable of the wheat and the weeds, we wonder, what kind of enemy would spread weed seeds on another farmer’s field. The details that seem outrageous are often what make the parable so memorable.

In addition, the details can also puzzle us, making us wonder what Jesus means exactly. We try to associate something with each and every detail contained in the parable. However, care must be taken to not try to over-analyze the elements in the parable. For instance, we do not attach any significance to the broom used by the widow who swept her whole house to find her lost coin. So, you can see, challenges arise as we attempt to properly interpret the relevant parts of the story and not overreach with our minds.

The foundation of Jesus’ parable is the kingdom of heaven he inaugurated with his incarnation, birth, and baptism. As Jesus began his ministry, he proclaimed to the people that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. This new kingdom did not leave when Jesus died. It did not end when he ascended into heaven. It is still with us today. We live in the kingdom of heaven, as believers in Christ, the one who paid the price for our sins.

The parable reflects the now of the new kingdom as the 10 maidens are invited to the wedding feast. They live in the realm of the ones invited to share in the victory of Christ’s resurrection. This is the now kingdom waiting for the not-yet

manifestation what is promised by God through the prophets of old and affirmed by Jesus. This is the season of history we live in today. It is the growing season of the church. It is the time when God loves and cares for a people, giving all the gift of life. Sadly though, many reject the gift offered.

As the bridegroom is delayed in the parable, the anticipated celebration is postponed. As time drags on, the maidens grow weary and all fall asleep. All ten lamps go out. The natural course of human life will exist in the interim between Jesus' ascension and his return. The cycles of life created for our benefit in God's magnificent creation will continue to operate as we wait. For nearly 2,000 years our world has waited for Jesus' return. Many have wondered when He will return, asking, "What is taking so long?"

Then comes the sudden announcement that the bridegroom is here. All awaken and look to enter the feast with him. But 5 of the 10 virgins are not ready. They do not have the oil needed to relight their lamps and guide them to the meeting place. They ask the 5 "wise" virgins to share their oil with them so they too can join the celebration, but there is not enough to share. The "foolish" women were sent to the marketplace to find what was needed. The "wise" virgins were not being unloving or "unchristian" in their not sharing. As we will see, the oil is not something that could be divided up and shared.

It is here that confusion can enter our minds regarding this parable. If we over analyze these elements of the parable it breaks down and leads us away from the point of Jesus' teaching. We must keep in mind that Jesus is calling us to be ready. Looking at things in harmony of Jesus' theme we are led to look at the oil for the lamps is not a commodity that can be split between individuals and shared. Instead, it is the very thing that reflects the preparedness of the invited guest.

To assist us in understanding this parable we need to look at other teachings of Jesus relating to the kingdom of heaven. The parable of the sower comes to mind as we see, the word of God spread far and wide, taking root in soil that represents human hearts. The seed that falls among the rocks and the seed rooting among the weeds in many ways reflects the "foolish" in the parable today. Where the word takes root, faith is created, but it does not last. It is destroyed by tribulation or choked out by the cares of the world. It is also reflective of the weeds in the parable of the wheat and the weeds, where the weeds are allowed to grow with the wheat but will be separated at the time of the harvest and cast into the fire.

The “wise” virgins can be seen as the good soil, where the seed takes root and faith flourishes and grows. It remains strong and vibrant until the time is right for the harvest, when it will be gathered and taken into the master’s barn. Into the house of the Lord.

Viewed in this light we understand the oil as an item that cannot be divided and shared but is that which marks one as prepared for the coming of the bridegroom, the Messiah. This is the one thing necessary for salvation. This is faith. Faith in Jesus as our Lord. Faith in the Christ as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. Faith as Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3,

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (John 3:16-18).

Salvation comes through faith in Christ Jesus, the bread of life, who speaks in John 6 saying,

³⁵ “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:35-40).

To accomplish this, to strengthen our faith, we are led to gather together in worship, where we receive the gifts of God each week. This is where the Word of God is proclaimed to us to fill our reservoirs with the oil of faith needed to trim our lamps. It is in the waters of Baptism where this faith is first given to fallen sinful man. It is here that we are joined to the family of God as heirs of the kingdom. It is in this community of faith gathered around God’s Word where we receive the forgiveness of our sins in confession and absolution. Where you hear the Word of

God announce to you that you are forgiven, cleansed of all unrighteousness. This is the place where the Sacrament of Holy Communion is celebrated in which we receive the true, physical body and blood of Jesus to strengthen us and keep us firm in our faith. As we eat and drink Christ's flesh and blood, we receive the forgiveness of sins and assurance of our salvation. Gathered in the name of the Lord, we are given the oil needed to trim our lamps when the announcement of the coming of the bridegroom awakens us as he comes to take us into the wedding celebration.

Be ready, Jesus tells the world. For the time is coming when he will return to judge the living and the dead, as we will confess, in a few moments, in the Apostles' Creed.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, "Be ready." "Be wise." Live in the grace of our Lord, building up your reserves of the oil of faith as you persevere in faith in Christ that has taken root in your hearts. Be strengthened by the Word of God, both written and in the flesh, so that you may stand firm in the one true faith and be found ready to enter the kingdom of heaven when our Lord returns.

Amen