

Sermon for the Last Sunday of the Church Year – Matthew 25:1-13

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Not a few of Jesus' parables are set in the theme of a wedding banquet. The parable of the 10 virgins is one of them. Unique to the parable of the 10 virgins is that this scene is the preparations for the wedding feast. According to first century Judean custom, the wedding banquet was to take place in the home of the groom. Prior to groom's arrival, a great crowd of family and friends fills the streets and pours over into the alleys in front of his dwelling. As the crowd gathers, the groom and several close friends make their way to the home of the bride, which is assumed to be across town or in a nearby village. From her location, the groom collects his bride and escorts her back to his home, where the crowd awaits the marriage feast to be held.

But, the groom, bride, and close friends would never take the most expedient route to return to the house, even though the passions of youth would mostly dictate otherwise. No, this joyful group, this exuberant parade would deliberately take the longest possible route back to the groom's home. Why? So that they might wander through as many streets and villages as possible so that most of the populace could see and cheer them as they passed.

Meanwhile, back at the groom's home (the site of the wedding feast) the crowd of family and friends anticipates his arrival. They wait...and wait...and wait. The setting is at night, so darkness obscures the passing of time. Among the many guests are 10 virgins with 10 lamps lit, of course, because it is night. This was so they could see, but also for their safety. These 10 young women are very similar. All have lamps, each have a lamp that is burning. But still, there are differences among them. Half of them have brought extra oil with them in small flasks, while the other 5 have not taken this precaution.

The jubilant parade continues to wind slowly, slowly, slowly through the village. It takes longer than youthful and enthusiastic women anticipate. The wise virgins realize that it could be the middle of the night before the wedding party arrives at the groom's home. All of the young women become drowsy and doze off outside his home.

Then, finally, the front of the parade enters the alley and the cry goes out, "Behold, the bridegroom. Come out to meet him!" Guests and family rush back into the street. The 10 virgins arise quickly, recognizing that some time has passed. So much time as passed, in fact, that the burning lamps need to be replenished. To their horror, five of the young women suddenly realize their mistake. Their lamps are almost out of oil and they have no reserves. The wise virgins take their small flasks of oil and calmly replenish their lamps. The 5 foolish women crowd around the wise and frantically demand oil. "We don't have enough for ourselves – and as for you – you solve your own problems!" The irritated foolish virgins stomp off to beg, borrow, or buy a bit of oil.

But in the meantime, the groom and his new bride arrive and the entire crowd sweeps into the house and the door is shut. After all, it is night. Then the five foolish virgins finally acquire some oil, get their lamps working, and arrive back at the house. "Sir! Open to us!" they shout through the door. "Sorry," replies the groom, "I don't know you." The locked door is what they deserved.

So what? How do we make sense of this mysterious saying of our Lord? How can we understand our Lord's parable? Is not Christ the Bridegroom who has found His Bride the Church? Does He not tarry long as we, the crowd, await His return to welcome us into His eternal feast without end? This is no secret. Life in the Kingdom of God requires commitment to the long haul. Advanced planning is necessary. Reserves must be on hand. Which is to say there is no instant discipleship; there is no instant maturation in this kingdom. The wise virgins knew it might be a long haul and prepared accordingly. Being a Christian is becoming more and more difficult. Doubts and persecutions are what we face. The sacred cow of religious inclusiveness that in Jesus' day wandered the streets of the Roman world now transverses the highways and byways to find fertile pastures in our contemporary culture. Having the Word of God like an extra reserve of oil so that you may proclaim the hope that is within you is necessary ... having God's word of your forgiveness echoing through your heart and mind is mandatory.

Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God, but many around Him were not prepared when it arrived. Anna, Simeon, and Nicodemis were ready. The disciples were not ready until after His death. The high priest, Jesus' Nazarite neighbors, and many of the Pharisees were not ready. The Shepherds were ready. Herod was not. The wise men were ready. The Bethlehem soldiers at the time of Jesus' birth were not.

Perhaps the most sobering part of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins comes near the end of the story: "...those who were ready went in with Him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But He answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.'" The Kingdom has a door that can and does close. The answer to those pleading on the outside is unsettling: "I do not know you." Why? They did not know him! Just as Herod and the soldiers saw only with their eyes a weak child that must be eliminated; just as the High priest and Pharisees could see only with their eyes a dead man on a cross and nothing more; they did not know him. But Anna, Simeon, and the shepherds recognized by faith that in that little baby boy, salvation was found. Nicodemis and the disciples realized by faith that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, heaven was opened to sinners who believed. This is to know Jesus: to know Him as the Forgiver of your sins.

But what about you? You see a man in a funny robe pour water on a child, but in faith you see the power of Jesus' merit and an heir of God's kingdom being made. You see men distributing small circles of bread and sips of wine, but in faith you see your Savior feeding you the forgiveness of your sins. Your sins are forgiven! By faith it is so! In the Day of Judgment, what we see by faith will become reality. There will be no more faith, for faith will give way to sight and we will see life as it really is. To that end, Come Lord Jesus.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠