

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Last Sunday of the Church Year
Matthew 25:1-13
November 25th, 2012

Back in college my English professor gave the class a writing assignment that asked one simple question: Why do people go to Church? She put us in groups to discuss this assignment before writing began. Being the only Pre-Seminary student in the group, as well as being young and naive, I was going to tell my fellow group members why people go to church. Besides, the other members of my group probably had no idea how to answer that question. I boldly spoke up and said, “Well obviously if someone is going to church, then they must have a faith in God that leads them there. That has to be the reason someone would go to church.”

One particular student looked at me and said, “You don’t have to have faith to go to church.” I said, “Sure you do. Why else would anyone come to Church if they didn’t have faith?” My fellow group member, who was obviously more intelligent than I – or more experienced with such things replied, “For a girl. I’ve been to church plenty of times, for a girl.”

He was right. There could be any number of reasons someone might go to church. That reason might be for a special occasion like a baptism or a confirmation. Someone without a saving faith might come in loving memory of a faithfully departed friend or loved one – a funeral. Someone might come to celebrate nuptials at a blessed wedding Service. At any given time, any given Sunday, any given Service, the Lord’s House may be filled with those who have no saving faith.

In the Gospel text for today, the virgins were doing what was customary for a wedding. According to old Jewish custom, the bride awaited the groom in her home, surrounded by youthful companions. The groom came in company of his friends to meet her here and to lead her in procession to the wedding. As he approached, the maidens went to meet him. Then the joyful procession went forth to the place where the marriage feast was prepared. The maidens entered the hall of feasting with the rest of the bridal company. Weddings were celebrated in the evening; therefore the maidens carried lamps to light their way in the darkness. Each virgin needed her own lamp to light the way. You see, the procession wasn’t over when they got to the town where the wedding would take place. They often processed through the whole town before entering the place where the wedding would take place. They needed more than mere vessels, that is, their lamps. They needed the oil that went along with it.

You see this illustration about the life of the Church and our lives of faith in it came as a result of the disciples asking a very specific question to Jesus on the Mount of Olives. They asked, “When will these things be (that is, the signs of the end of the age), and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?” Jesus told them and He gave “example-stories” to communicate how He will come and how we should live. He will come, like the Bridegroom comes. Jesus is the Bridegroom that comes when it is dark, late in the evening. More specifically, He will come when no one expects it – when some are sleeping – like a thief in the night. Jesus comes, and those who are prepared to meet Him are the church. They are the virgins ready with oil. The oil is faith. Each of the maidens had their own. Each needs their own. One cannot borrow faith from someone else – like those who had no oil desired to do. Each must have it for themselves.

Do you remember your catechism lesson regarding the church? There are two ways to refer to the church. There is the “visible” church – like the one you happen to be in this morning. And then there is the “invisible” church – the priesthood of all believers. Only God can see this church. For this reason, we call it invisible. God sees into the heart of every man and woman and knows if they belong to the church. There are those who come to this church (the visible

church) that do not have faith – like my classmate in college pointed out to a naive Pre-Seminary student who assumed that if you are in church, you have faith. The maidens who came to meet the Bridegroom (Jesus) were of two kinds: with oil and without oil. So it is for the visible church today.

Because the sum total of all believers is only known to God – because we cannot see into the hearts of our neighbors – we cannot be absolutely sure of anyone else’s faith. Sure, we bring every confidence before the altar of our Lord that our loved ones were honest when they confessed their sins and their faith before the Lord. I’ve got every bit of confidence they are faithful – that you are faithful – that you have oil for your lamp – that you have what it takes to be ready for the coming Bridegroom on the last day. But the one who can know for sure is you – for yourself.

By this I mean, be ready with your own oil. You cannot be saved by virtue of the faith of others. Faith must be what you possess. Be ready – ready yourselves for the coming of our Lord. We do not know when He comes. The day He comes will be too late for those who do not have faith. It will be too late for those who have no oil to go and buy some. Therefore, we are to be prepared each day.

So, set aside that which stands in the way of your faith. Set aside sinful ways – today – which damage this precious gift – has us take this precious faith given by our Lord for granted. Be like the wise maidens. Be prepared in season and out of season for the coming of our Lord. We do not know the day or the hour of His coming. This is a warning. Get rid of that which fills up your lamp and does not give your lamp what it needs to shine brightly in the night. Get rid of it and fill it with oil. Be ready – the Lord comes.

And be confident, beloved in the Lord, that your faith is an everlasting faith. Your faith is real and significant. Your faith, no matter how big or how small is faith indeed. Your faith, which sometimes doubts, which sometimes falters, which sometimes is shaken, is faith nonetheless. The Lord does not require you to have a perfect faith. You will not today, nor any day after today, have a perfect faith. The Lord requires, instead, a perfect sacrifice. And that was done for you, by our Lord Jesus who gives you what you need – oil for your lamp to be prepared for the darkest nights ahead – for the night when our Lord will come again. In the midst of a world that challenges the faith of even the most faithful, our Lord is not shaken – and our imperfect faith trusts in a perfect God. He is the one we rely on. He is the provider, the life-giver, the bridegroom that comes for His bride – the church – and that is you!

And so it is true that there are those who go out to the bridegroom without oil in their lamps. In other words, there are those who come here without faith. We cannot believe for them, but we can continue to share the truth in love. We can share our oil and hope they become wise enough to have their own – before the Bridegroom comes. This wisdom and faith comes from only one place and we can be confident that such gifts are found and given here by our Lord. And as we venture into a brand new church-year next Sunday, our anticipation of the coming Lord continues. The Lord comes – to you in His Word and gifts. The Lord comes – again – as we look forward to not only a baby in a manger but to a Lord who fulfills promises. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.