

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

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like 10 virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the Bridegroom.” Here are 10 girls, perhaps teenagers, on their way, every last one of them, to a party. A wedding, to be precise. They are, presumably, tickled to the point of teenage giggliness at their exciting day ahead. As being already invited to the wedding, they see nothing but flowers and cakes from here on out.

But “five of them were foolish, and five were wise.” The foolish maidens represent the wisdom of this world – the live-by-what-you-see wisdom that “God has made foolish.” (1 Cor. 1:20). But the wise represent the wisdom of faith – the wisdom of trusting the foolishness of God in Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:21-25). In actual fact, of course, both sets of girls have all they need for now. Similarly, both the faithful and unfaithful people of the world have identical shares of the world’s goods and ills. The sun shines and the rain falls on each alike. But only the wise have faith that will get them through their lives in solid contact with the presently unseeable and unknowable Bridegroom.

At this point, the Bridegroom is unseen. The absence of the Main Character from this part of the parable corresponds directly to our lives now. After all, this parable is about a judgment pronounced on a world from which God, through all its history, was effectively absent, it seems. Or, to put it more correctly, God was present in a way so mysterious as to constitute, for all practical purposes, an absence. Yes, He’s in the world. But He’s seen for us in Word, water, bread, and wine, and only through the eyes of faith. So God’s basis for judgment is solely on faith or unfaith in the mysteries of His age-long presence-in-absence of Divine redemption for us. Note, faith in the mysteries of God’s grace has been a constant emphasis in all Jesus’ parables, miracles, and life in other places in the Scriptures. But in this parable of the 10 virgins, faith in Christ Crucified and His Word and sacraments is, quite simply, everything.

“For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them.” The image is that of life lived on the ordinary, prudent basis of what is likely to happen. It’s a picture of luck that will always hold with no efforts to deal with the implausible. “...But the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.” Notice how Jesus deliberately stands things on their heads. The five supposedly foolish girls, knowing that they have been invited to a daytime wedding that will last only into the early evening, reasonably assess their needs and content themselves with taking filled lamps with them. Nothing could be more sensible. But the other five insist on dragging along huge bottles full of oil, just in case. Nothing could be more idiotic: they have complicated their lives by preparing for an utterly unlikely contingency.

The point of this story – the point that makes wisdom of apparent folly – is that, in this world, something always does go wrong. “As the Bridegroom was delayed,” He said, “they all became drowsy and slept.” The giggles go on through the day and into the evening. The lamps are lit and the ten maidens talk on into the night. Finally, though, the wedding feast waiting area turns into Sleepyville: all ten are sacked out on couches and across the floor.

“But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the Bridegroom! Come out to meet Him.’” This particular verse, in the grand scene of this parable, reminds us of how the world really is. The unexpected does happen – regularly! The Bridegroom’s delayed arrival is an unforeseen detail fitting perfectly into God’s unpredictable world!

“Here is the Bridegroom!” has become the church’s catchphrase as it ends every Christian church year. The Last Sunday of the Church year is our annual celebration of the hidden reality of our salvation ... now revealed! Without shame or fear, we rejoice to behold Christ’s appearing in

judgment. Why? Because He's got the gift for us and we've got the trust in Him. "Now come, Thou Blessed One,/Lord Jesus, God's own Son,/Hail! Hosanna!/We enter all the wedding hall/to eat the Supper at Thy call." Alleluia, and three cheers!

"Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps." They all take the ordinary prudent steps that life in this world dictates are necessary. But then they discover something: all the wick trimming in the world—all the brilliant steps that might be taken to make a properly designed operation run right—are irrelevant, because the operation is not predictably designed. The Bridegroom is late for His Own party: God has seemingly taken so long to do anything that the world has dug its own grave in the meantime. Unless there is something other than the wisdom of the world to help it, there is nothing for the world to do but lie down and die.

It is that something, that faith, that other-worldly wisdom which this world counts as foolishness—that faith becomes the only matter of judgment in this parable. Now all the girls, wise or foolish, have found out there is no way of going on from here simply by going on from here. Faith comes to the fore as *the* sole criterion for distinguishing between them. "And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.'" Time has at last run out, as it always does in real life. And since faith is something we receive in real life, the time for faith has run out too. That received gift of faith is our relationship to God. Inevitably, there will be a point at which will be said that that relationship does or does not exist.

Someday, late or soon, it will be too late even to believe. We become what we receive. Since we trust, we become trusters, and we enter into the sure possession of Him whom we trust. If we distrust, we become distrusters and close out the only relationship with reality ever offered to us. But since we've been brought into God's trust relationship as a member of the wedding feast of the Lamb by His death for us on the cross, why shouldn't we act as if we're at the party? If Christ has already reconciled both my wayward self and equally difficult co-workers or family members, why shouldn't I trust Him to do just that and let His reconciliation govern my actions in those relationships?

"And while they were going away to buy, the Bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us.' But He answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I never knew you.'" The shut door is God's final answer to the foolish wisdom of the world. All you wise fools who trust in the death of Jesus and receive His gifts—though you are last, lost, least, and dead—you go into the party. The dreadful sentence said to the distrusters—those who followed the foolish wisdom of the world—"Truly, I say to you, I do never knew you" is simply the truth of their condition. God does not say to them, "I never called you." God does not say to them, "I never loved you." God does not say to them, "I never drew you to Myself." He only says, "I never knew you—because you never bothered to know or receive Me."

"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Remember what we're watching for—a party. That party is not just down the street making up its mind when to come to us. It's already among us. The unknown day and hour is not dreadful; it's already here in the Divine Service of God's grace for you. God is not our mother-in-law, coming to see whether her wedding-present china has been chipped. He's that Dear Old Friend joining us for an eternal party of good memories, laughs, and love. We do indeed need to watch for Him; but only because it would be a pity to miss all the fun. Amen.

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

*Most of the content of this sermon was based upon the observations of the Rev. R. F. Capon in his book Kingdom, Grace, and Judgment.*