

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

“The kingdom of heaven will be like...” and so Jesus begins another parable about eternity. It’s another wedding feast. But with this one, the guests do not refuse the invitation. They all go out to meet the Bridegroom upon His arrival. We’re told specifically about 10 of the guests: virgins with their lamps lit and waiting outside the wedding hall. They wanted to be part of the celebration and so they prepared themselves.

In other parables, guests are invited to the wedding feast and choose not to come. They reject the celebration altogether. In another instance, a man who refused to wear his wedding garment while in the party and was booted out. In the same fashion as these others, in the parable of the 10 virgins, the guests are invited. They are present. They are decked out in their wedding apparel. What could go wrong?

A delay. The Bridegroom is late. And Jesus is telling us that we should expect this. Jesus too can be delayed. Years go by. Our prayers are not answered in the way we think they ought to be. So we stop praying. This world keeps on going anyway. So our Christian life becomes drab and uneventful and we become accustomed to it. Nothing special ever happens.

Then “[the virgins] all became drowsy and slept,” today’s Gospel says. You have to expect that. Even the most enthusiastic and energetic person gets tired. You can’t be excited the whole time. Not even diehard fans stand for all nine innings or all four quarters of the game. We have to rest. We all have times when our attention is focused on something else. We all have times when our gusto goes a bit numb and becomes stagnant.

But Whoa! Then the Bridegroom comes, and that’s when the big difference becomes clear. Half of those virgins who were waiting had oil in their lamps and half didn’t. It doesn’t help that they asked their neighbors if they could borrow some. What this parable is trying to tell us is that in the Last Day, there’s one thing that we cannot give to another. While there’s many things in life that we can and should borrow and share with others, one thing we cannot. Not even with our best intentions. On Judgment Day, there’s something no one can share. Not with his best friend or his own beloved child, when the “one Lord Jesus Christ ... come[s] again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.” And this thing that is so very personal is at the same time so necessary and decisive.

What is this secret oil that is so indispensably needed? What is Jesus talking about with the virgins, the oil and the lamps? What makes the wise virgins wise and the foolish virgins foolish? It is faith. The faith that unites us with Christ and lets Him live inside of us. Faith is trust and confidence in the grace and mercy of God through our Savior Jesus Christ. Where that faith exists is where we’re ready to meet Him when He comes. Through that faith we

constantly live in the forgiveness of sins. Even when we can't think about Jesus. Even when we're asleep. Even if we lie unconscious near death.

But for now, what can you do to get the oil? The answer? Use God's words and pray. Faithfully go to your Savior's communion table. We now live in the time when the oil of faith flows greater than the Missouri River after several days of hard rain. The sun is shining. Share the word. Proclaim it from the mountains. It is still day. But there will be a time when it will not be so. In the hour of our death and on the Last Day. Christ will return visibly and with great glory on a day known only to God. The books of all consciences will be opened. For those who have no faith, their own consciences will accuse them. When they find that their lamps have no oil, when they find their consciousness has no faith, they find even all the good deeds they've done for others to be meaningless and empty.

Jesus' last words of the parable are frightening. "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Would we too be so foolish as not to heed this warning? Would we put off repentance until tomorrow? In the days of Noah people were buying, selling, marrying, vacationing, thawing turkeys, and decorating for Christmas. And then the flood came. What makes us think that the same thing won't happen in our day when Christ returns to judge both the living and the dead?

So watch over your heart. Be always ready to repent. And don't close your heart's door to your Savior. How does that happen? When we consciously ignore God's Word. When we make our decisions based on "saving face," expediency, and keeping everyone happy rather than the narrow way of God's Word. When we neglect to pray and stop listening to His Word. The Bridegroom knocks at our door. Will we hear Him? Will we answer?

The parable of the ten virgins gives us both warning and comfort. Many opportunities and enemies exist to drive us from Christ and His Word. The devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking who he may devour. Our flesh is all too ready to give into this world's temptations which are ever before us. But it's Christ who keeps us in the faith. He increases, strengthens, and preserves us in our faith. He keeps us ever watchful and vigilant, like children who await visiting family members and open the door immediately. That's what Jesus enables us to do for Him when He returns. That's why the return of Christ is our great comfort and hope. But when we have to think about something else, when we have to sleep, or in the days to come when we can no longer consciously remember or think about Jesus, He won't forget us. He won't abandon us. He no longer sleeps, for He is risen. His lamp will never be extinguished. Every day and every minute, we are His. When we're awake and when we're asleep, we are His. Even when our consciousness is gone, we are His. In day and night, life and death, we are His. Amen.

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