**Matthew 25:1-13** November 15, 2020

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*Matthew 25:1[Jesus said,] “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2Five of them were foolish and five were wise. 3The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. 4The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. 5The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. 6At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ 7Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. 8The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’ 9‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’ 10But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. 11Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’ 12But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’ 13Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

How far down the road are you supposed to focus your eyes? Looking at the bumper of the car in front of you may be appropriate for parking lots and traffic jams. But not out on the street. Looking a couple hundred feet in front of you is enough for in-town driving. You’ll see stop lights turn red in plenty of time. You’ll notice the kid on the side of the street just in case that ball gets away from her. But on a freeway, moving at over a mile a minute, your eyes had better be farther down the road. When you see a rash of brake lights a quarter mile ahead, you had better take your foot off the accelerator immediately.

Jesus would draw our eyes even farther down the road in this “Parable of the Ten Virgins.” He would focus our eyes on a point so distant that we well may not even reach it in this lifetime (though we might!). The day he focused that Jewish crowd on was 2,000 years or more in their future! Imagine that! Imagine being told that there is an event in 4000AD that is so important that *you* should change *your* everyday life for that future event. You would dismiss someone talking like that as a quack, a con artist. “What could possibly happen 2,000 years in the future that I should change my morning routine, my weekend relaxation, the way I think about things?” Indeed. That is just the reason that Jesus used shocking language. He knows how we think. He knows that we don’t like the long game. (Having said that, I want to reiterate that this future day could literally be tomorrow!)

But that day *is* that important. Because what lies on the other side of that day is not a couple thousand more years, but eternity. Jesus wants us to be ready for that moment, and the wedding feast that lies beyond.

**Let Us Be Ready!**

Now as we look at Jesus’ parable, we need to know a few things about first century Jewish life. Those people had very different customs, especially in the really big life events like birth, death… and marriage.

In our reading, we are listening to a first century Jewish wedding. Those were rather different from our weddings. Then, a Jewish couple would get engaged, which for them, was legally binding. (To break an engagement required a legal act. You didn’t just return the rings.) But even though legally bound, they lived apart for some weeks or months. A wedding feast was planned for a future date. Only then would they start living their lives together. On that special day, in the evening, the groom with his attendants would leave his newly prepared house to go get his bride from her house. She would be waiting there with her bridesmaids, and once the bridegroom arrived, the entire wedding party would proceed to the home that the husband had prepared for their new life together. Like our grandest weddings, there would be a huge celebration for dozens or even hundreds. This beautiful, joyful day is the setting for Jesus’ parable.

One other thing that is good to know is about the “lamps.” Some think that these lamps were typical lamps: small bowls of olive oil with a wick. Most, however, think that these are torches: sturdy sticks with rags tied around the top. The rags would be doused with olive oil and lit. These torches would have to be trimmed and refueled every 15 minutes or so. It seems that, since wedding processions were outdoor events, we should imagine these ten bridesmaids with torches, not lamps.

At any rate, these bridal processions would have played out several times a year, every year, in every Jewish town. Everyone knew what they were, how they worked, and what was expected of the participants. But not in Jesus’ parable. In Jesus’ parable, things went wrong because, ***“Five of [the virgins] were foolish.”***

This wasn’t rocket science. All they had to do was keep a torch burning. This wasn’t some new-fangled technology, like the first time you logged on to Instagram and didn’t know what to expect. Young people had watched the wedding pageant play since their childhoods. Just keep the torch burning. That’s all. But five of the ten ***“were foolish.”*** Their eyes weren’t very far down the road. They were looking at the bumper in front of them.

Speaking of driving… In Alaska, there is a gravel road that stretches for 400+ miles across the northern half of the state, to the Arctic Ocean. It begins at a place called Livengood and ends at a place called Deadhorse. Those place names tell you what you need to know about that road. It is the Dalton Highway. When you get just 1/3 of the way up the road, you reach the last gas station at a place called Coldfoot. (I’m not making these names up!) There on the right side of the road stands what has been billed as “The farthest north truck stop in the world.” Signs shout at you, “Last services for 256 miles!” So, here’s the question. What would you call someone running on a quarter tank of gas who just blows by the truck stop at Coldfoot thinking they’ll wait to fill up at the next gas station? A fool? Exactly!

That’s these five maidens! They had one job. They knew what it was. They knew how to do it. And they weren’t the least bit prepared.

What does it all mean? Jesus told the story of this wedding procession gone wrong after a lengthy teaching session. In Matthew chapter 24 Jesus had spoken at great length, to his disciples, about the last days of the world. He told them that those last days would usher in a Final Judgment. That judgment, Jesus warned, would come suddenly. He then put an exclamation point on that teaching session with this parable. This parable embodied what he had just taught them. He tells them, **“Be Ready! Always!”** This is Jesus’ message to Christians of all times.

**A.** One of the things Jesus warns against is this thinking that we can enter heaven on someone else’s coattails. Sometimes people will say to me—people who rarely get to a worship service with their fellow Christians—“Pastor, be sure to say a prayer for me.” Next one who says that, I am going to say, “Can’t!” Not because I am angry or actually would refuse, but to use it as a teaching tool because of what Jesus says in this parable: ***“Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’ ‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you.’”*** No one else can believe for you. You can’t live in a house and expect that the faith of your spouse or child or parent is going to save you. Faith doesn’t work like that. God knows the laziness, the dishonesty, the gaming the system. Those who insist on being unprepared will pound on the doors with their excuses. God will say without rancor or emotion, just a simple judgment of the facts, ***“I don’t know you.”***

Now at just this point we must be careful to never think that getting into heaven is our responsibility. We are saved because of God’s undeserved favor and gifts, not our efforts. We know that only Jesus’ forgiveness won on the cross covers the blame and the shame of our many and daily sins. We can’t possibly make up for a single one of them before God. And yet in speaking to his people, Jesus clearly points out that while God did all the work, each individual must be mindful of the end!

At this point, we should stop to consider how shocking this parable was to Jesus’ listeners. Turning away people with wedding invitations, late or not, and refusing to share oil was *not* something people in Jesus’ day (or our day) did! But here Jesus adds a hook to his story to get his listeners to think.

What an important point it is! How many people wander aimlessly through this life, refusing to be bothered by any thought about God. Pretending they have too much to do, didn’t hear the phone, forgot about the service. They think that they will have another chance to set things right. Jesus says, that doesn’t happen! Be prepared!

We return to the parable at verse 5, ***“The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.”*** You can see them. Ten high school age girls (that’s the age the bridesmaids would have been in Jesus’ day.) Laughing, giggling, so happy for their friend. And as the night goes on, one after the other falls asleep. One on the bench. A couple leaning against a tree. Others on the ground. One after the other their torches sputter and go out. All is now silent and dark.

What does Jesus mean by this? It doesn’t seem that Jesus is talking about sin or spiritual slumber. All ten fell asleep, and none of them were rebuked. I believe the falling to sleep simply reminds us that Christ’s second coming is much delayed by our way of thinking. Barring Christ’s second coming, every one of us must fall asleep one day. Indeed, so it has happened with the first several billion of Christ’s people! And as they have fallen asleep, prepared or not, so shall they wake.

Five fell asleep prepared, ready to light the lantern for the bridegroom. They had invested in the ultimate long-term investments, keeping their eyes focused well down the road, and they woke with the torch in hand and the container of oil at the ready. How blessed they were and would be! ***“[They] who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet.”*** (10b)

How do *you* stay prepared through the many days of your life? If you were blessed with parents who escorted you to God’s house throughout your childhood, how does that childhood wonder over God’s house remain yours through the many changes of life? How does that interest in heavenly things weather the teens and early twenties when new, radical and fun ideas your parents never told you about, and maybe even tried to hide from you, when they capture your attention? How do you stay focused on the one thing needful when career and family and society crowd out the simple child-like pursuit of the kingdom of God? How do you remain steadfast through the heartbreaks of the middle years when the pillars of your life, your parents, pass away; when those you love in the generation after you choose paths you wished they had never heard of? How do you stand firm as your years lengthen and few around you have stood firm through the decades, and you feel only a relic of a time and faith that no longer carry currency? How do you stay prepared?

You live in the grace of God. With such thoughts in mind the writer to the Hebrews wrote, *“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching”* (10:25). Like Mary at the feet of Jesus, we let the many things that worry and upset us crash about us and we calmly listen to the words of the Lord (Luke 10:42). As Paul admonished the Colossians to keep their minds on things above in Christ, we *“teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and [we] sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in [our] hearts to God”* (3:16). We gather around the Sacrament of Holy Communion as the Lord himself bid his disciples to *“do this in remembrance of me”* (Luke 22:19).

For those who thus have fallen asleep waiting for their Lord, they shall wake to triumph. Yes, we laid them to rest in the bosom of the earth this past year, these past years. But for those laid to rest with faith in their Savior—that thing the world counted so trivial—they shall rise hearing his voice, and accompany him to his kingdom. They shall wake with those who before them departed this life prepared. They shall wake with us who will follow them. And we together shall enter the wedding feast of the Lamb.

**Are You Ready?**

Dear Lord, keep us ready. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.