

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27A)

November 12, 2017

Text: Matthew 25:1–13

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

What a joyous couple of weeks we've had in our dual parish. On Reformation Sunday, we heard once again that the eternal gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the divine message that sinners like you and me are saved, forgiven, and declared righteous because of the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Through faith alone in Christ alone, we are justified in the eyes of God the Father almighty and made heirs of His eternal kingdom. And then, on All Saints' Sunday, we rejoiced in the practical result of our justification. Every Christian is a holy, righteous, saint of God, clothed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus. In short, you are all justified, saints of God in and through the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What joy we have; what enduring promises are gifted to us. Because of these great treasures, we Christians look forward to the day of Christ's return. Our dear Lord Himself taught us through His Word that we are to remain prepared for His second coming. We are to be watchful and alert lest we forget what has been given to us in the Gospel, in our justification through Christ. Dear saints of God, there are precious treasures we are to protect as well as real dangers we must identify and guard against. Holy Scripture teaches us that we are always to watch for and remain constantly prepared for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Beginning today, and continuing for the next couple of weeks, Matthew 25, will receive a good deal of attention. The primary theme throughout Matthew 25 is Christians are to remain alert and prepared for our Lord's return. The challenges and opportunities are great. The Lord Jesus is the master teacher; He begins by comparing the kingdom of heaven to 10 virgins awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom.

Let's begin, keeping in mind that we are receiving instruction and renewed strength in our preparation for Christ's return. According to the parable, ten maidens were asked by the bridegroom to take part in his wedding procession to the wedding hall where there would be feasting and rejoicing. It was quite an honor to participate in such a meaningful way in the most important event of the couple's life.

The maidens had only one assigned task. When the bridegroom arrives and the wedding procession begins, light the lamps and join in the wedding parade to the wedding hall. Just be ready with lighted lamps when the procession begins. And there will be much rejoicing.

Apparently, 1st century Jewish bridesmaids were to wait near the house of the bride. At some point in the day, the bridegroom and his attendants would come from his house to the bride's house and take her to the wedding hall. Exactly when this would happen was not known. So the brides' maids had to prepare in advance so that they can be ready to light their lamps at any part of the day; morning, noon, or night.

This is a parable teaching about the kingdom of heaven. The bridegroom represents the Lord Jesus. The ten virgins represent the Church, waiting for the return of Christ. The oil represents the faith and spiritual vitality that Christians receive when they are born again through Christ's Gospel. Five virgins were wise, five virgins were foolish. All ten are part of the Church. This isn't a parable about Christians and non-Christians. It's about the Church, the kingdom of heaven. So Jesus is talking to you and me, to all who claim the name of Jesus.

Within His Church, there will be those who are wise and those who are foolish. All ten have lamps that are quite capable of burning oil. In other words, everyone in the Church has the same access to the spiritual life of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. There aren't separate categories of Christians within the Church, some who have more access to oil than others. All are baptized, have the same Gospel, and partake of the same Lord's Supper. So what determines who's wise and who's foolish?

Those who are prepared for the return of the Bridegroom whether He come early or late, are wise. Those who are unprepared for a delayed return or those who think they can guess when the bridegroom will return, are foolish. What reveals the wisdom or the folly of the virgins – in the parable – is the bridegroom's delay.

The ten were given a great honor to be participants in the wedding. But that honor also had responsibilities. You must be ready when the procession begins; let nothing keep you from being prepared. Live as if nothing else mattered, as if this wedding is the most important event in your life. That's the urgency we are to sense from our Lord's teaching.

Let's bring this home to us. We Christian virgins, made holy by the glorious gospel of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, are to live as if this wedding celebration is the most important event in our lives. And the Scriptures teach us, both OT and NT, that this divine wedding celebration is, in fact, the most important event to which all the old creation anticipates; and the new heavens and the new earth will be created precisely for this wedding celebration. There is nothing more important in heaven or on earth than this wedding. Our eternal destinies will be judged to be either wise or foolish based upon our readiness for Christ's return.

Dear saints, we must have copious amounts of oil ready in order to account for any and all contingencies and circumstances. Remember, the oil represents a living, vital faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When it comes to our most holy faith in Jesus, we don't try to economize. The wise virgins in the parable brought "flasks of oil with their lamps" (vs. 4). We must have oil ready for good, easy times, when the joy of heaven and earth seems to be ubiquitous and abundant. We must have oil ready for the difficult, hard times when life feels like we're being squashed between a brass heaven and an iron earth. Our most holy faith must be able to endure physical and spiritual hardships and difficulties. The foolish virgins did not prepare for such unanticipated contingencies; they ran out of oil and were unprepared for the bridegroom's return. Consequently, they heard some of the most terrible, frightening words spoken to them by the bridegroom when they tried to enter the wedding celebration late, "I do not know you" (vs. 12). Remember, the bridegroom represents Jesus.

You see the point? Jesus is telling His disciples we must be ready when He comes again. Nothing is more important. Nothing can distract us from that day. We've been invited to our Lord's Second Coming and the great procession that will take place on that Day, a Day that we are to watch and be prepared for at any and all moments "for you know neither the day nor the hour" (vs. 13) says Jesus.

The wise Christian lives in anticipation of the wedding feast. Each day is marked by prayerful anticipation that this could be the day of Christ's return. Their lamps must be trimmed and prepared. Oil must be kept in store. It's constantly replenished by the promises given in our baptism: it works forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation to all who believe. Day by day, the oil is renewed and the lamps remain in good condition through the fellowship wise Christians have with God the Father through faith in Christ Jesus created and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Daily our faith is renewed by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. Prayer, praise, and thanksgivings are to be regular

features of our lives for we know that “the joy of the Lord is our strength” and the Father Himself has promised that “all things will work together for our good.” We Christians who seek to be wise in the eyes of Christ, the Bridegroom, hunger and thirst for the preached word of Christ and the frequent reception of Christ’s body and blood. Joining together with fellow Christians, fellow virgins, awaiting the return of Jesus, to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in our hearts to God, is refreshing for continued vigilance in preparing for the wedding feast.

The foolish Christian, however, doesn’t take the matter of Christ’s return seriously. Surely enough oil to fill a lamp once will be sufficient. God’s Word, His Gospel, prayer, sacraments, worship, are all neglected by the foolish who do not live as though the Bridegroom’s wedding feast is most important. Tragically, their oil runs out. The lamp of salvation goes out. Faith dies. Protect us from this, dear Father in heaven.

What keeps the wise ready is the joy that awaits every Christian at Christ’s eternal wedding feast. The Lord Jesus wants us to be part of His wedding festivities. It’s an invitation of lavish grace and super-abounding honor. We don’t know that day or the hour of Christ’s return. That’s ok. He will come when the time is right.

Now let all the heav’ns adore Thee,
 Let saints and angels sing before Thee
 With harp and cymbals’ clearest tone.
 Of one pearl each shining portal,
 Where, joining with the choir immortal,
 We gather round Thy radiant throne.
 No eye has seen the light,
 No ear has heard the might Of Thy glory;
 Therefore will we Eternally
 Sing hymns of praise and joy to Thee! (LSB 516:3)

Fill your lamps with oil. Rejoice and be glad. The day of Christ’s return is approaching.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.