

Pastor Kenneth Mars

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

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27A)

November 9, 2014

Text: Matthew 25:1–13

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

Beginning today and continuing the next two Sundays, the Last Days and the 2nd Coming of Jesus will occupy our focus and attention. And a timely reminder it is for us. The cares, anxieties, and plain busyness of day to day life tend to lull us into sleep and inattention to the things of God. That's one danger we Christians face: spiritual lethargy and fatigue.

But there's another danger, maybe the opposite extreme. Preachers, theologians, authors work up Christians into a near-frenzy with end-times speculations with this or that event and with predictions about the day and the hour of Christ's return. This is the danger of spiritual anxiety.

Both dangers, spiritual lethargy and anxiety, are deadly and corrosive to Christian faith. And they share a foundation problem: an inability to wait patiently in hope for the fulfillment of Christ's promise to come again. The Lord calls us to walk a middle way: constant readiness for Christ's return while be prepared to remain faithful for a long delay. Regardless of how we look at it, we're called to wait in readiness with a vibrant hope in the Lord's glorious return.

Today's parable from Matthew 25:1–13 highlights the need for waiting in readiness and in hope. Jesus describes His kingdom in terms of a typical 1st century wedding. Wedding practices in ancient Israel are quite different than our traditions. For one, modern weddings tend to focus on the bride: her dress, the color and kind of her flowers, how the brides' maids' dresses coordinate with the bride and the overall theme of the wedding.

In ancient Israel, the groom was the center attraction. Everything depended on the groom. Everybody, bride, family, and guests alike, waited for the groom. Nothing happened until he showed up. And everybody better be ready when he did or the social stigma would be fierce and long-standing.

One thing modern and ancient weddings share in common was the need for attendants; we call them bridesmaids and groomsmen. In today's parable, they're called virgins, bridesmaids. And there were 10 of them in this wedding parable. They represent us, the holy Church, as she waits for the coming of the bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The 10 virgins had one simple task but it was important in the 1st century wedding culture. When the bridegroom arrives and the wedding procession begins, light the lamps they are carrying and join in the wedding parade to the wedding hall. That's it. Just be ready with lighted lamps when the procession begins. Sounds simple enough, and indeed it was. Be ready with lighted lamps and there will be much rejoicing.

The trouble was that nobody knew when the bridegroom and his wedding party would come and begin the procession to the wedding hall. The 10 virgins had to be ready to light their lamps at a moment's notice. They had to wait and be ready in the knowledge that the bridegroom would come at the appropriate time to be united to his bride. Wait in hope. Be ready at any time.

That's our task as God's people. Wait in hope. Be ready at any time whether the Lord comes early or late. Describe it any way you like, we are to wait in readiness and hope for the Lord's return.

I don't think there would be too much dispute in the observation that we 21st century moderns aren't very good at waiting patiently. We live in a world of instant information on high-speed cyber highways. The results of most of the elections this past Tuesday were known that evening, certainly by Wednesday morning. Do you remember the anxiety people were feeling when it was unsure whether George W. Bush or Al Gore won the 2000 presidential election? All that hanging chad in Florida, etc. The result wasn't settled until 6 weeks after the election. That kind of delay was commonplace when votes had to be hand counted and results reported by mail traveling on train or horseman.

And this inability to wait influences the church as well. One of the greatest pieces of sacred music ever written is J.S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion. It was written for the Good Friday service and it takes more than 3 hours, sermon not included! None of our services at any time in the year last more than 80 minutes, sermon included. Would anybody come if they knew it lasted 3 hours? Who can wait nowadays to hear the account of the Lord's passion and death presented in such a way?

But these are really superficial examples. The Bible doesn't tell how long or short worship services should be. But my intent is to demonstrate that we don't wait very well. And yet the Bible, in many different places, calls us to wait in hope for the Lord's deliverance and salvation. Some 65 or so times the Bible says something like this:

"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope" (Psalm 130:5).

"But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me" (Micah 7:7).

"But they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).

Christ's Church is a waiting church. She waits in hope for the fulfillment of God's promises but most especially for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the event to which all history is pointing. It is the hope of the Lord's 2nd coming and the resurrection of all flesh that we are baptized into. It is the Lord's return we pray for in the Lord's Prayer, "thy kingdom come." Every Lord's Supper is a celebration in the anticipation of the eternal wedding feast of Christ and His Church (Is 25; Rev. 19).

The parable uses the common task of 10 young women carrying lighted wedding lamps to describe the absolute and essential necessity of Christians being prepared for the return of the Lord Jesus. Five of the 10 were ready, 5 were not: 5 were wise in that they were ready; 5 were foolish in that they were not prepared. The cry came out at the most unexpected time: midnight! Who ever heard of starting a wedding party at that crazy time of the night! But the call came out, "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" (vs. 5).

The truth of who was waiting patiently and in steadfast hope and those who weren't prepared became apparent when the bridegroom arrived. The 5 wise virgins quickly lit their lamps and joined the wedding procession. The 5 foolish virgins ran out of oil meaning they couldn't join the procession and were excluded from the wedding celebration.

To put it all concretely, the 5 foolish girls were excluded from the kingdom of heaven. They represent those within the Christian Church who are not prepared for Christ's return. The cares of this life have choked their faith or anxiety has left them in utter despair. In either case, they are subsequently excluded from God's eternal kingdom

because they could not wait and ready preparation. Tragically, they try to enter the wedding hall, the kingdom of God, only to hear this terrifying rejection, “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you” (vs. 12).

In the parable, nothing distinguishes the 10 bridesmaids from each other except the oil needed to light their lamps. We need not allegorize the oil and say that it represents the Holy Spirit, or faith, or grace or good works, etc. The Lord’s point in the parable is for His people to live in constant preparation whether He returns soon or late. The groom arriving at midnight (vs. 5) suggests strongly that the Lord’s return will be later rather sooner. But we must be prepared either way.

Our constant readiness is exercised by trusting in what Jesus has said. He provides all that is needed for life and salvation in this life and the life to come. Give attention to My holy Word says Jesus especially My Gospel promises of forgiveness, eternal righteousness through justification, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Remember your baptism and all that is promised there. Eat and drink My body and blood regularly and faithfully for it is the food of eternal life. Remain constant in prayer for I have promised to hear you. Live in the purifying hope of seeing My face and the glory of the redeemed rejoicing in My Father’s kingdom. Be faithful in the various callings and vocations I have given to you: fathers & mothers, husbands & wives, children, employers & employees, co-worker, citizens, church members, and so forth. By loving those I give to you, you are loving me, says Jesus.

The Lord will come to take you to Himself. And when He comes, you will join the celebration of His eternal triumph accomplished on your behalf! Watch and wait. Do not be weary or anxious. The day of your final victory is coming. Amen. Come Lord Jesus.

✠ 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.