

“READY TO WAIT”

Matthew 25:1-13

Last Sunday of the Church Year

November 20, 2016

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Last Sunday of the Church Year comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 25, verses 1 through 13. It is on page 702 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us that we must always be ready for him to return, but we must also be ready to wait, because it might be a while. Please stand for the gospel. From Matthew 25, we begin reading at verse 1.

25:1 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. **2** Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. **3** For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, **4** but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. **5** As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. **6** But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ **7** Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. **8** And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ **9** 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.’ **10** And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. **11** Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ **12** But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ **13** Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Jesus is coming. Dear saints, we must be ready. We must always be ready, because Jesus is coming, and we do not know the day, nor the hour. In fact, we do not know the year, nor even the millennium. But we do know this. We do know that Jesus is coming back. And since we do not know when he might come, we must always be ready.

Being ready for Jesus to return at any moment means that we must be ready for him to return this very day—even before this sermon is over. But it also means we must be ready to wait ... for a long time. We must be ready to wait our entire lives. The saints who have gone before us waited their entire earthly lives. Then they fell asleep in Jesus Christ. Their souls are with Jesus now, while their bodies wait. And we must be prepared for the same thing to happen to us. We must be prepared for Jesus to return immediately. And we must be ready for him to be delayed another two millennia.

That’s what this parable is about. It is about a faith that is ready ... whenever. It is about a faith that is ready right now, but is also ready to wait ... for a long time. It is about a faith that is ready for Jesus to return today ... or a hundred years from now. It is about a faith that is ready when we are at church, when we are at work, when we are at home watching the Vikings lose, when we are awake, when we are sleeping, and even when we are dead. We must have a faith

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that is ready to suffer our entire lives, even as we pray for Jesus to come and free us, and even if we fall asleep before that glorious Day comes.

That’s what this parable is about. So let’s look at it. Jesus doesn’t tell us what each part of the parable represents, but we can draw some pretty fair conclusions. There are a few elements that can be interpreted different ways, but every interpretation should agree on the main point, because Jesus tells us what the main point is at the end. If you have a Bible handy, you can follow along as we walk through it.

In this parable, Jesus says, “**The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins ...**” (25:1). So we see from the opening line that it is a parable about the kingdom of heaven.

And it is a futuristic parable. More commonly Jesus says, “**The kingdom of heaven is like ...**” Those parables often describe the kingdom of heaven in its present form—as we experience it now, or as we receive the forgiveness of sins in the present. But in this parable Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven *will be* like ...” He is speaking of that glorious Day when he will come again to transform the Church militant into the Church triumphant.

And the imagery he uses for this is a marriage feast. It’s hard to imagine a more joyous occasion than a marriage feast. Unless you have a secret crush on the bride or the groom, wedding receptions are a purely joyous occasion. Two people who have been waiting for each other and looking for each other are now together. Everyone sees how beautiful it is. And to celebrate, you eat really good food. It’s great.

In ancient Jewish culture, they didn’t really have a religious ceremony like we do. Instead, the bride and groom would first be betrothed to each other by a sort of legal contract. During this waiting period, the groom would prepare—perhaps even build—a house for himself and his new bride. This might take a while. And after the house was ready, he would prepare a feast for the wedding celebration, and go fetch his bride. He would go on the appointed evening to her parents’ house, where she was waiting with her bridesmaids. And they would have lamps to light the way from the one house to the other. And so we have the parable of these ten virgins—or bridesmaids—with their lamps.

Some understand the ten virgins (25:1) to represent all of humanity, but it is probably better to understand them as representing the entire visible Church on earth, that is, all the people who appear to be Christians—those who are members of a congregation, whether they actually believe or not. That’s because all ten of these virgins have the appearance of being ready for the bridegroom to come. They look like they are waiting for him, but we will see that not all of them are indeed ready.

Five of them were foolish, and five were wise (25:2). The foolishness of the foolish is manifested when they bring lamps, but no oil (25:3). This is foolish.

Now, we don’t use lamps with oil in them very much anymore, so let’s translate it into a modern illustration. This is like going camping with a flashlight, and no batteries. I’m hiking along with my backpack. It’s got all the stuff I want on my camping trip, like some candy bars and my phone ... so I can play games in the wilderness. And I don’t know what else to bring, so I just stuff it full of newspapers so it looks full. And attached to the side of my backpack, I have a fancy looking flashlight, so everyone can see it and think I am a serious camper. But I don’t have any batteries. It’s just for looks. I’m not a serious camper. I just want the appearance. This

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becomes apparent when the sun goes down, and my friends all turn on their flashlights, and I say, “Ooh; how do you make it do that?” I went through the motions of looking like a camper, but I am not in fact a camper, because I am not ready.

Now, whether you are an experienced camper or not, I am sure you all know that flashlights need batteries. It would be incredibly foolish to go camping without them. But that is how foolish the five virgins are who brought no oil. So why didn’t they bring any oil? Everybody knows you need batteries for a flashlight, and everyone in the ancient world knew that you needed oil for a lamp. So why didn’t they bring any? Were they really that ignorant? Or maybe they didn’t expect to actually need their lamps. Maybe they didn’t think the bridegroom was actually coming. Maybe they thought he was just a myth. Or maybe they didn’t think he would take so long. Maybe they thought he would come while it was still light out. They weren’t prepared to have to wait so long.

So the five virgins represent those who only pretend to be Christians. They go to church because of family obligations, or because they just think it is a good thing to do—maybe it will make them better people. But for whatever reason, they don’t actually believe all this stuff about Jesus. Maybe they think he’s a myth. Or maybe they think he was a real person, and a good moral teacher, but they don’t think he actually rose from the dead, they don’t think he is preparing a place for his Church, and they really don’t think he is actually coming back.

They have the outward forms of Christianity—the lamp—but they don’t actually believe any of it. They don’t have faith. That’s the oil.

But the wise virgins brought containers filled with oil (25:4). They actually believed the bridegroom was coming, so they were ready. If he came early in the evening, they were ready. And if he delayed and came later in the middle of the night, they were ready for that too. The oil is a picture of their faith. They believed the bridegroom was actually coming, even if it might take a while.

And it turned out that the bridegroom was in fact delayed (25:5). The parable doesn’t say why he was delayed, but we do know why our Jesus is delayed. St. Peter tells us. He says, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Jesus is delayed in coming because he wants more and more sinners to be ready on that day when he does finally come.

In terms of the parable, the bridegroom is delayed because he is giving those foolish virgins time to realize what they’re lacking. He is giving them time to go and buy oil before it is too late.

But they don’t go. Nightfall comes. And then the bridesmaids—both the wise and the foolish—fall asleep.

We could understand the nighttime simply to represent a time when we do not expect Jesus to come. But we could also understand it to mean *death*. And this would be consistent with how Jesus often talks about death. He calls it “sleep,” because he knows it is not permanent. And in this way the parable would apply to the great many people who have fallen

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asleep before the return of Jesus. And this may apply to us as well. Jesus will return, and we must be ready for it to happen at any moment, which means we also must be ready to wait our entire lives, because it may not happen until after we are dead. We must have a faith that endures all things, even death.

So all ten of the virgins fall asleep. And in the middle of the night, the cry goes out, **“Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.”** (25:6) This is like the “cry of command, ... the voice of an archangel, and ... the trumpet of God” (1 Thess. 4:16) on the Last Day when Jesus returns. This is the announcement that wakes the dead from sleep.

And all ten of the virgins wake up—not just the wise, but also the foolish (25:7). We know from other parts of Scripture, that when Jesus returns, he will not only raise his believing saints, but all the dead will be raised (Rev. 20:11-13). And in this parable, it is not just the five wise virgins who wake up. They all hear the announcement that the bridegroom is coming.

And at this moment, the foolish realize how foolish they were. At this moment, they realize that the bridegroom is actually coming. And they realize they should have brought some oil. So they say to the wise, **“Give us some of your oil”** (25:8). But the wise do not have enough to spare. They only have enough for themselves.

And faith is the same way. When Jesus comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead, your grandmother’s faith will not save you. It can only save her. You must have your own faith. You must believe. And as we hear in the parable, waiting until Jesus returns will not work. By then it will be too late.

The five foolish virgins have to leave at the last hour to go buy oil (25:9). But this won’t work. For one thing, the merchants aren’t open in the middle of the night, and even if they were, they don’t have enough time. It is a tragic and hopeless picture of simply being too late. The bridegroom came, those who were ready went into the marriage feast, and the door was shut (25:10). When the foolish virgins finally came, it was too late. The bridegroom said, **“Truly, I say to you, I do not know you”** (25:11).

And it’s true. The sin of the foolish virgins was not ignorance. They knew lamps need oil. Everybody knew that. And it wasn’t procrastination either. Laziness was not the reason they didn’t bring oil. They didn’t bring oil because they didn’t believe. They did not believe the bridegroom was actually coming. Otherwise they would have been ready. They either didn’t believe he was real, or, if he was real, they didn’t believe he actually loved his betrothed enough to go through with the marriage. They simply did not believe. And by the time their unbelief was exposed, it was too late.

So that brings us to the whole point of the parable. Jesus says, **“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour”** (25:13). Jesus is coming. It may be soon in terms of how we count time, and we must be ready for that. Or it may be a long time. We may have to wait our entire lives. We may have to wait so long, that when Jesus does finally return, he will have to wake us up from death. We must have a faith that endures to the end, whenever that may be.

So let’s talk about this faith. Why should you believe that Jesus is actually coming? And how can you know that when he comes, he will find you to be wise?

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The answers to both these questions are found in *The Gospel of Matthew*, just a few days, and a few chapters later.

It’s one thing to tell a good story. A lot of people can do that. But it doesn’t mean we should expect to see them floating down from heaven on a cloud. So what’s different about Jesus?

Well, Jesus told this parable on Tuesday of Holy Week. And the important part is what happened a few days later. On that Friday, Jesus went to the cross—willingly—to suffer and die for our sins. This is what he did to purify his bride—the Church (Eph. 5:25-27)—so that when he comes, he will find all of her true members to be holy and righteous. For this reason Jesus suffered, died, and was laid in a tomb.

But again, why should we believe this? A lot of people die.

The proof came on the third day, when Jesus woke up from death and walked out of the tomb. To believe this is to be wise. To believe that Jesus died and rose again for the forgiveness of your sins is to have the oil that will light your lamp on the Last Day.

And the resurrection is what makes Jesus different from every other story teller who can tell a good tale. And it is what makes Jesus different from every other person who has been laid in the ground. Jesus is different because he said he would suffer, die, and rise again (20:18-19). And then he did. And this is how we know that Jesus is coming. If Jesus can prophecy of his own resurrection, and then make it happen, then we can trust all his promises.

The resurrection is the proof that Jesus will fulfill his promise to come again.

And the cross ... The cross is the proof that when he does come, he will come to you in mercy. This is what you must believe. This is the oil that will make you ready and wise when the bridegroom comes.

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘**Surely I am coming soon.**’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!
“The grace of the Lord Jesus we with [you] all. Amen.” (Rev. 22:20-21)