

Matthew 25.1-13
Last Sunday of the Church Year
21 November 2021
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

It was my first sermon in this pulpit. I doubt any of you remember it. But it was a pledge to preach to you as if you were dying—because you are. It was a pledge to preach to you as if it were the last sermon you might ever here—because it might be. It was promise to preach to you as if the return of the Lord Jesus Christ were imminent—because it is.

I pray I've upheld my end of the bargain. Because, after all, that's the point. Everything that happens here and now is for then and there. You need Christ now because you need Him at the moment when you arrive at that "it is appointed for every man a time to die, and after that the judgment." You need Christ now because you need Him at the cry of the command, at the shout of the archangel, at the sound of the last shofar. You need Him now because you—poor, death-and-hell-bound sinner that you are—you need Him now because though you are in the midst of mortal life, the snares of death surround you. You will die. The Lord Christ will return. And He will judge. He will judge all. The living and the dead.

Now, of course, the first thing to put aside is the "when" question. When will this happen? Pastor, you say it's imminent. But what's imminent?

I don't know. Neither do you. This hidden in the counsel of God Himself.

The only point is that it's imminent. Two Sundays ago we learned that we are already in the end of times. The abomination of desolation has already been erected in the holy place—and continues through false doctrine and false prophets and false christs to be erected in the holy Christian Church. What more could there possibly be to say, "It's imminent"?

No. Today we're not concerned about what exactly is meant by "imminent." The Gospel, in fact, takes it for granted that Christ's return is imminent. The Bridegroom, Christ, has gone away. But if He's gone away, that means He's coming back. For this Bridegroom never stands up the Bride at the altar. His Word endures forever. His promise to return is carved not in stone but literally on the palms of His hands. His promise is driven into His feet. It's the gash in His side, the scars that encircle the crown of His head. That was the price of the wedding party He's going to throw: His holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death.

Well, it's right there that the parable begins. The promise has been made. The promise is sure to be kept.

Now look. Right off the bat we meet this group of virgins. This was typical Jewish wedding practice. The bridegroom went away, and part of the wedding party—the maids of honor, if you will—awaited his return. Because at his return, the wedding would go off.

So here they are. We might imagine that they all look alike. Today, they'd all be dressed in their bride's maids' dresses. There's no doubt who they are. They're the only ones at the wedding forced to wear a peach chiffon.

Only here, what marks them is they all have lamps.

Now, it's no secret what these lamps are for. The Bridegroom can arrive at any time, day or night. If by night, in the Dark-Sky country of ancient Palestine, you need a lamp. And to use your lamp, you need oil.

Which is to say, you need to be prepared. You can't turn on your flashlight if it has no batteries.

And it's exactly on that point that we start to see fissures in this group of virgins.

10 virgins. And they're split right down the middle. Five are foolish. They're in fact *μωραί*, morons, fools. And five of them, well, our translation calls them "wise."

But "wise"—that sells them short. There are several words in Greek for "wise." There's *σοφός*, which most nearly approximates our sense of "wise." But the word Jesus uses here is different from that. They are called *φρόνιμοι*. They have a mindful wisdom. A wisdom that isn't here one minute and gone the next. A wisdom that permeates every nook and cranny of their life and, importantly, impels them and drives them to do what their wisdom dictates. Practical wisdom.

Think of the Boy Scouts. There's a certain Boy Scout wisdom, isn't there? They know all sorts of stuff. They know how which knots are for which application. They know what the rigging for rappelling down cliffs looks like and what needs to be done to anchor the equipment safely at the top of the cliff. They know that friction creates sparks, and that dry stuff lights when touched by a spark, and that oxygen fuels the flame. They know that many layers of leafy branches stacked on top of each other can repel rain.

But it's not just that they know that stuff. They can put it to use. They can tie those knots, rappel down cliffs, start fires without matches, build shelters in the woods out of nothing but what's found in the woods. You name it, and they can do it. Their motto isn't "Be wise," it's "Be prepared."

And in fact that's exactly the wisdom of the five "wise" virgins. They don't have head knowledge only, they have practical wisdom, wisdom put into practice. At one point Jesus even stops calling them "wise" and calls them "prepared." This is what He says: "While [the foolish virgins] were going off to buy [oil] the Bridegroom came, and 'those who were prepared, who were ready' went in with Him to the wedding feast and the door was shut and locked" (v. 10).

You see, the basic wisdom is the knowledge of the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ. All ten virgins had it. All ten, after all, had lamps, were waiting, listening for the cry of the voice, "The Bridegroom is near; go out to greet Him!"

But while five of them *failed* to turn that wisdom into practice, five *did*, in fact, turn that wisdom into practice: they brought along oil. They had extra flashlights for their batteries. A Boy Scout who knows what a bowline looks like but couldn't tie it with a gun to his head is no Boy Scout at all. He's unprepared.

Beloved in the Lord: neither are you prepared for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ—in the least—if you assent to all the teachings of the holy Christian faith but do not practice them. Our confessions deride that as *mera notitia*, "knowledge and nothing more." It's not faith. It's not trust. Because faith is a busy, active, living thing. It avidly seeks what it lacks—the righteousness of Jesus. To be prepared for His return to condemn the faithless, it seeks to grow in faith in Him. And so it attentively and with joy hears

God's Word read and proclaimed. It feels starved if for a week it hasn't heard, "I forgive you all your sins." It daily pinches itself and says, "You! You're baptized! You're a child of God!" Starved, it seeks Divine food, the Holy Sacrament of its Lord's Body and Blood. And wise like those five virgins are wise, it revels in the company of others who are wise—wise unto salvation, that is. A week without gathering with fellow Christians is like a week away from the family.

You know, our LCMS Kansas District will be introducing a new thrust starting in the summer of 2022. It's called "Living as the Baptized."

It couldn't be more timely. For we, just like these virgins, haven't forgotten what it is we believe; we've forgotten how it is that we live it.

So let me be entirely frank about what this practical wisdom of the practically wise looks like. It means Saturday in and Saturday out setting your alarm for 6:30 a.m. It's a pain, I know. But everyone complains about lack of specifics in preaching, so here we go. Set your alarm for 6:30. When it goes off, don't hit snooze. Get out of bed, get showered, eat breakfast. Get the kids dressed, fed, and then pile into the mini-van. Your destination isn't the soccer field or the basketball court. It's 901 SW Fillmore. This you do how many Sundays of the year? Right. Every one.

And then, don't just "attend church." Participate in it. Full-throatedly. Sing all the hymns, especially you dads. Your boys won't sing hymns if you don't. And if you don't sing the hymns you're not taking seriously your charge as a priest of God to proclaim the faith into the ears of everyone else, and certainly not your charge as head of the household to teach the Faith. Speak all the liturgy. Pay attention to what it's saying. Learn it inside and out. Teach it to your children. Give 'em stars at church for every part of the liturgy they know and sing.

And then, when church is over, go and have coffee and spend more time with your fellow wise virgins, and learn from them: they're wise! And then send the kids up to Sunday School. And don't forget to set them an example. Sunday School for kids isn't kubitizing time for mom and dad. Sunday School for kids is Sunday School for parents. Your child will think so little of the teaching of God's Word—will come to think of it as nothing but child's play—if you yourself aren't engaged in the life-long pursuit of the teachings of Holy Scriptures, and demonstrably so.

And when you get home, and even on your way home? Well, the channel's gonna get flipped to the Chiefs game soon enough. But before that talk about what you heard today. Teach the Gospel and then re-teach it. That way the Word of Christ will dwell richly in you. There'll be plenty of time for the Chiefs.

And from one Sunday to the next? Well, it's daily devotions. If there isn't a *Portals of Prayer* staring at you begging to be used on the corner of your kitchen table, then you need to put one there. It's at least five prayer times a day: waking, breakfast, lunch, dinner, bedtime. Use the standard prayers if you want. But get in the habit. It's Wednesday evening Sound Words Academy and Evening Prayer. What a blessing that is to our congregation! How many man-hours of learning God's Word goes on there! How much oil gets spilled in flask after flask as the wise prepare for the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And how often? How often home devotions? Every night. How often five times daily prayer? Every day. How often Sound Words Academy? Every Wednesday. How often Sunday Divine Service and Sunday School and Bible Study? Every Sunday.

Fellow-redeemed, that's almost as practical as I can get. That's the oil for the lamp. And it's gushing all over this congregation.

But I can take it one step further. If all the advice I just gave seems overwhelming to you, impossible to take advantage of, then you need to take some big life steps. Your life has become cluttered with meaningless things. You've allowed what the world says is important to crowd out what Jesus says is important. If you can't make it here every Sunday because your kid's on a traveling team, could it be more evident? The catechism of the world has taught you that it's better for your child to get on varsity than for your child to be counted among the five wise virgins when the Bridegroom returns. That being in a gym is better than being in God's house, though the Scriptures say, "Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere." If it's too much trouble to wake in time for church and Bible study on Sunday morning, then you need to re-set your internal clock and adopt a better sleep pattern. If family devotions are impossible because no one's around the table for a single meal in the day, the world has taken your focus off where you primarily belong—in your family—and put it where it doesn't belong, on teams, or activities, or what have you. If any of this is true, you need to repent. Reorient your life. And hold sacred what God says is sacred: His holy Word.

And that, that's living like the baptized. That's grounding yourself in your primary identity. You are first and foremost baptized. A child of God. A virgin awaiting the return of the Bridegroom. Live like it.

Because the option behind door two is nothing if not downright scary.

Remember, what makes these virgins different from each other isn't that they don't believe the Bridegroom is coming back. It's that five of them are morons—and utterly unprepared.

You see, the five, they've heard the same exact things you just heard. How you need to have oil in the flask. That the oil in the flask is the oil the Lord ladles out in God-sized scoops in the holy Christian Church and through His Word and nowhere else. That it's the righteousness of Jesus laid upon His believers through His Word and Sacraments. We already talked about that.

But for whatever reason, they didn't want it. Do you see that? Oh, they'd been to church. A couple of times. Maybe even a couple of times a year. Maybe even a couple of times every couple of months. But their lamps weren't full. No sooner had they lit them than they went out.

And their lamps went out. They started begging. Begging wise for some oil. Begging the wise for what the *wise* had.

And to that begging the wise could only pronounce the severest Law: "go to the sellers and buy some yourselves." For the fools wanted the wise to give them the righteousness they needed as if the righteousness they needed could come from anyone but Jesus. As if the righteous had stored up the treasure house of merit than can be found in and from Jesus alone.

Can you imagine the horror of this situation? It's the final hour. There's no buying and selling to be done. It's midnight. The stores are closed. But the foolish are put into such a frenzy in their Law orientation that they think there's still something to be done. Still something *they* can do. Still some way, *quite apart from what Jesus had been offering them all along*, to go and buy with their earnings what only be given by Jesus alone.

And here we see the huge difference between these two groups—the wise and the foolish. Both knew Jesus was coming back. Both were waiting, in a sense. But only the wise trusted Jesus to give them what they needed for when He returned. And that attitude—the unbelieving attitude of the foolish—gushes

out and exposes them for who they are. It turns out that all along they had actually been unbelievers. Unbelievers under the guise of belief.

For one who had believed in Jesus Christ would have believed Him merciful and would have said, “Uggh. My lamp is empty. But Jesus will fill it.” But one who had not believed would not believe Him merciful and generous, and instead run off to gather, as quickly as possible, whatever it was the Jesus demanded.

So let’s throw this all back to the first action of the parable and draw out what’s by now completely evident: the five foolish didn’t give a care in the whole world for the oil, for the righteousness of Jesus. They just didn’t. They may have flasks, too, for oil. But they weren’t full, because they never let them be filled, even though Jesus stands in the midst of His Church ladling that oil out. They might have gotten a splash of oil in their lamp at Baptism. But for them what they were and who they were and how they lived and the fact that they were good kids when kids and good adults when adults—that was enough. And so when the time came—when it really mattered—for their lamps to be lit, they got nothing but a dried up wick.

Beloved in the Lord, for Christ’s sake, don’t do that. His death was no joke. It was for you. His holy, innocent life was no joke. It was for you. His harrowing of hell was no joke. He was shutting hell’s gates to you. His ascension into heaven is no joke. He’s gone there to prepare a place for you.

And He’s showered you with His gifts. That’s the oil. Your Baptism? Nothing but oil in the flask. Use it. Tell yourself every day, “I am baptized.” The Absolution? Nothing but oil in the flask. It tells you that despite your flesh that does what you don’t want it to do, you still stand in God’s grace, sins forgiven. His holy Meal? Nothing but oil in the flask, and plenty to stand in the judgment. For by it Christ joins you to Him and Him to you, making all that’s His yours: His life, His salvation, His heaven.

And those are no joke, either. If you were getting engaged and your boyfriend gave you a ring, would you swat it to the ground and chuckle and say you don’t want it? Of course not.

Well, the gifts of Christ are the engagement ring. And He means it. Take them. Wear them. Use them. For by them He joins you to Him and Himself to you. And by them you will be saved.

In other words, live like the baptized. Live as if you’re dying. Live as if the Lord Jesus is coming back. And live as if His return is imminent. Because it is.

Even so, Lord Jesus, come. Come quickly.

Amen.

pax domini, etc.

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