

Matthew 25:1-13

“A Warning: Are You Foolish or Wise?”
Pentecost 24 (Proper 27 A)

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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Jesus said: ***“The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise”***
(Matthew 25:1-2).

Who really enjoys waiting? I don't. Waiting for anything really doesn't come naturally, especially when we live in an instant gratification culture. At the click of a button, your desire is found in the online cart. In just another click, it's on its way to your home. In the words of Veruca Salt from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, “If I don't get the things that I'm after, I'm going to scream. I don't care how, I want it now!” If we're honest, that's who we are. We want it now! Why read a book when you can just stream the movie? Why make supper when you can just order fast food?

But there is another risk. If the waiting goes on too long, it's possible that you can forget what you were hoping for. You see, ever since Jesus bodily ascended into heaven, the Church has been waiting for His return. In the first years, there was eager expectation. But then it seemed that the waiting was too long as we heard in our epistle from 1 Thessalonians 4 today. Did they misunderstand? Do we misunderstand? Is Jesus going to keep His promise? Is Jesus really ever coming back?

Since waiting isn't easy, and because there is a risk that we can forget or lose hope, Jesus tells us a parable on this 24th Sunday after Pentecost. And if you are honest with yourself, this parable is frightening. In fact, it's terrifying. But remember, Jesus desires all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. So, as terrifying as this parable is, Jesus is warning us, so that we would be counted among the wise.

Again, ***“The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise”***
(Matthew 25:1-2). First thing to note here is who are the wise and who are the foolish. What do they represent? If we take the wise to be believers and the foolish to be unbelievers, we are missing the point of this parable. Jesus isn't speaking about Christians versus non-Christians. Jesus is speaking this parable to His Church. So, the foolish and the wise are you and me in this very place. He is warning the foolish to “wise up.”

You see, this parable is actually a variation of the Parable of the Sower, in which Jesus warns us about the dangers of the devil, the dangers of persecution, and the dangers of covetousness.

As Christians, we are not secluded from the fallen sinful world; we live in this fallen sinful world. We live in a world that is full of doubt and full of sinful desires. We live in a world that is filled with false gods. Even false gods that claim to be the one true God.

Perhaps, the most deceptive false god is the god who is always loving – *not loving in the way that we know God to be in Jesus* – but loving in a different way, a false way. A god who is always tolerant. A god who is always accepting. A god who will always accept you as you are – *unrepentant and drenched in sin*. A god who will always receive you. A god who will always love you. A god of the open door. A god of the second chance. A god who shuts one door and opens another. A god who shuts two doors and opens a window. That’s the false god that this fallen sinful world and its fallen prince offers to you.

Today, Jesus comes to shock you with a vision of a different God, who is the one true God. Jesus doesn’t want you holding onto that false god as you think that you are prepared, because you aren’t. So, Jesus says, **“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven”** (Matthew 7:21). For these ten virgins, they each thought they were prepared. They each thought they had the right way of thinking. But only half were truly ready.

As it was custom then, on the wedding day, the bridegroom would dress in wedding garments, and his friends would escort him to the house of the bride. The bride would then come out to meet them with her friends, in this case, the virgins, who would be known as bridesmaids today. The only question would be when? So, the bride and the virgins would always have to be ready as the bridegroom could arrive at any hour of the day or night.

When the bridegroom would arrive, the whole group would joyously parade to the home the bridegroom had prepared. Elsewhere, Jesus used this imagery to describe His relationship to His Church saying, **“In My Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to Myself, and where I am you may be also”** (John 14:2-3). You see, the Christian life now is like a betrothal, and heaven will be like marriage.

So, here we have ten virgins waiting in the night for the bridegroom to come. But as they waited, the hour grew late, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight, when the virgins all least expected the bridegroom, He arrived with the cry of command, with the voice of the herald, ***“Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet Him!”*** (Matthew 25:6)

Then the virgins all rose and trimmed their lamps. At that instant, five of the virgins realized that their lamps were going out. They never considered the possibility that the bridegroom might be delayed, so they brought no extra oil for their lamps. So, they wandered into the darkness to find a merchant selling oil. Now, what does the “oil” here represent? The oil represents faith. And faith is not anything that we can earn or purchase. Faith is only continually sustained by the Means of Grace: hearing God’s Word and receiving His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation through Holy Baptism, Absolution, and through the eating and drinking of Christ’s body and blood under the bread and wine.

Now that the bridegroom has come, what does He do? Does He leave the five wise there at the door and tell them to go out into the world to find the foolish? No! He gathers the wise in and He shuts the door.

Earlier in Matthew, Jesus said, ***“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you”*** (Matthew 7:7). But that’s not what happens here. Those foolish virgins certainly ask. They asked the wise to share their oil and they do not receive. The wise say, ***“Go to the dealers and buy for yourselves”*** (Matthew 25:9b). And they seek. They go out looking for that merchant. But then come back only to find that it’s too late. And they knock. They knock on that door saying, ***“Lord, lord, open to us!”*** (Matthew 25:11). But the door is not opened. Then the bridegroom says, ***“Truly, I say to you, I do not know you”*** (Matthew 25:12).

Here, we have a Jesus who is not seeking the lost, who is not opening the door, who is not inviting everybody in, who is not bringing in the blind and the lame and the poor, so that the banquet hall may be filled. He shut the door. It’s barred and bolted shut. Here, Jesus is dividing between the foolish and the wise. He has taken the wise and to the foolish, He says, ***“I do not know you,”*** because they had neglected their faith by not receiving His Means of Grace, by ignoring the will of God the Father in having other gods, since they did not hold God’s Word sacred by gladly hearing it and learning it. They would rather say they know Jesus, but in doing so, they do not show fruits of that faith. They would rather live a life no different than any heathen. This is extremely frightening. This is what could be called spiritual shock therapy.

Jesus is coming. He will come to judge the living and the dead. Sin is sin and all sin is worthy of damnation. Foolishness is foolishness and by saying you know Jesus and then in return live a life does not put Christ in the center will cause you to be ejected from the kingdom of heaven. So, when God shuts the door on that final day, God shuts the door. He shocks you into reality. He shocks you into the reality of what it means to come before God who judges the living and the dead.

But as terrifying as this may be, Jesus is still Jesus. As I said earlier, Jesus is saying this parable so that you and me would be counted among the wise. He is saying this parable as gospel, so that we would be warned. He is saying this parable, so that we would not lose hope.

The same Jesus who has the power to say, *“I do not know you,”* is the same Jesus who uses that power to come and know you even in your sin. God the Father sent this Jesus into this fallen sinful world that would reject Him. Jesus came to a people who would not know Him. Even though His disciples would deny Him and fall away, Jesus still came to know them. And, even though, we, in our sinful nature, would kill Him, Jesus still came to know us. He came to know us in our sin, so that we would know Him as our Savior from sin, death, and the devil. He came to bring you into His grace.

Today, that shedding of Christ’s innocent blood is the oil for your lamp. Jesus is the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. That blood and water that flowed from His side as He was crucified even flows today. That water with the Word washed you clean and gave you faith. That blood now flows with His body in the Sacrament of the Altar so that your sins are forgiven, and your faith strengthened for the day of the Lord’s coming.

In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, Jesus does not mince His words: you are either waiting for Him or you aren’t. Here, in the Divine Service through His Means of Grace, Jesus prepares you so that you would be counted among the wise. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +