

Five Wise Lutherans and Five Foolish Lutherans  
Matthew 25:1-13  
Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost  
November 8, 2020

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

Our text, Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

After another week in our society that has proven how the nations rage and kingdoms totter, you might find yourself finally learning to cry as God would have you do: “Come quickly, Lord Jesus!” But perhaps the great anguish one might feel over election chaos or ongoing pandemic problems ought move us to ponder whether our faith is actually well-prepared for Christ’s coming! If your life seems to ‘hang in the balance’ based on society’s well-being or the body’s guarantee of physical well-being, perhaps we’ve not stayed awake and kept our eyes fixed on Jesus, as we often assume of ourselves.

What might be learned by experience in daily life may also be meditated upon before the altar of God. It would seem these final three Sundays of the Church Year that we begin today are, to use the cliché, ‘not for the faint of heart.’ The faint heart is not spared from considering the truth that not just the outwardly wicked, but also the

inwardly indifferent will all be left outside when the door to the eternal banquet is shut.

But, in reality, these Sundays are *exactly* for the faint of heart, for Christ knows us... He knows our tendency toward dreariness... He knows our lethargy... He knows how we get distracted by very worldly cares... and He even knows how we all sleep the sleep of death as we await our divine Bridegroom's long-promised return.

In fact, here we are again near the end of the church year... having already perhaps forgotten Jesus' same warning from last year's end-of-the-church year to 'stay alert' ... (yes, how much has gone on this year that has distracted us from the promise of Christ's return... so that we have our eyes and hearts peeled on pandemic and politics and not on Christ), and so again, the call goes out: "Watch therefore! For you know neither the day nor the hour!"

Now, why are His words so firm? It's because He knows not only our *slothfulness*, but also that we do not readily take to heart what we should learn from studying those before us in history, and so, we are in danger of repeating their history!

Consider the words of Amos the prophet in our Old Testament reading: are they not words that sound forth in our day as well, warning a once-faithful people of their slumber?

The people of Israel in Amos' day eagerly looked forward to the 'day of the LORD' because they wanted His deliverance, but not

the deliverance *He promised*, but the temporal deliverance they imagined he *should* bring, as if ‘political deliverance’ or ‘long life on earth.’ They grew increasingly faithless even as they waited for that day of the Lord. And so, Amos cries out to them:

“Woe to you who *desire* the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light.”

Indeed, so many assume that most sinners, no matter how impenitent, will be saved... that there’s a heaven, but no hell... light, but not darkness. We hear it all the time: “Because God is really so loving and ever-patient, it shouldn’t matter that I despise preaching and His Word. It shouldn’t matter that I do not cling to His promises. It shouldn’t matter that I do not trust Him or fear His wrath. It shouldn’t matter that I put more hope in my society’s governance, my family’s creature comforts, or my bodily health. After all, God is loving... so I might as well spend my time focusing on other matters. A loving God will save me whether or not I trust his gifts, impenitently do my will instead of His, follow my ways instead of his, seek my glory instead of his.”

Against such foolish notions, Amos says the day of the LORD is the day of darkness (judgment upon the wicked), not a day of light (of Gospel for the wicked). Amos even graphically paints the picture:

“as if a man fled from a lion, and [ran into] a bear!

Or went into the house thinking it was safe for rest and was attacked by a serpent.”

Such danger lurks for those who do not focus on the things of God; and because people have so convinced themselves that all is spiritually safe, all is divinely merry, all paths lead to God... thus, they also think that their worship ought simply be all about feasting and praise and showing God how pleased He should be with them, rather than true worship being about begging as a dog at the feet of God Most High and trusting in His gifts which bring salvation. Consider how God responds to such 'complacent worship':

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them.

Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.*

The Scriptures refer to the Last Day as the day of Judgment because there *is* to be justice over wickedness, judgment upon: complacency and indifference, on smug self-righteousness, on all paths or life's concerns that lead *away* from begging for God's mercy in Christ and lead *to* relying upon one's self-assurances.

Now, what does this have to do with the Gospel reading? The theme of Amos is found in Jesus' parable. It's notable that Jesus says the kingdom of heaven will be like *ten virgins*: though not necessarily

a direct connection between Amos' prophecy and Jesus' parable, nevertheless perhaps Jesus' disciples would have recalled that in verses right before what we hear of Amos' forewarning one may read these words of lamentation: "Fallen, no more to rise, is the virgin Israel" And again, the Lord cries, "The city that went out a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which went out a hundred shall have ten left." And then, the next words of the lamentation: "Seek me (watch for me) and live!" Watch for me, you virgin ten!

*Now*, friends, we can consider the blunt message of Jesus' parable. Ten virgins – five foolish, five wise. For the bridegroom's return, some prepare foolishly, others prepare wisely. Some do not sense the urgency in waiting for him; others seek his coming and prepare themselves.

It ought not be overlooked in the parable that *all* became drowsy and slept. On the one hand, this is often interpreted as our sin: Christ knows us; he knows our weakness in remaining steadfast. "Can you not watch with me one little hour?" There is no merit to be claimed in keeping watch, for none of us keeps watch perfectly. We easily grow weary and assume that Christ is delayed. He does not come as quickly as we'd like; He does not sweep us away from life's problems, but allows us to endure them. He does not prevent us from the grave, but allows us to lie down and sleep in it for a time.

And that's the "other hand" on how to interpret the sleep of the parable's virgins... the sleep of *physical* death. How much we depend on God to *prepare* us for that sleep - in this life to constantly and repeatedly awaken us with His Word and strengthen us with His Sacraments! How much the lamp oil of faith needs be replenished with His Holy gifts, which prepare us for the sleep, that when we awake, we might have the oil of Christ's righteousness! Isn't it true that *all* will awake in the resurrection – faithful and unfaithful alike, prepared with the oils of salvation and those *not* prepared with the oils of salvation – all *will* rise in the resurrection of the body. But, those who have never been prepared by the oils of faith – Word and Sacrament, forgiveness and nurture – they will rise in unpreparedness. And the awakening from their slumber will leave no second chance to prepare themselves.

Behold, a cry rings out – the faithful watchmen of God doing their job: "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"

Five are ready. Five are not. And the five that are not must attempt to buy their oil, for they did not die in faith; they did not die in their baptismal anointing. They must buy their oil; but purchasing salvation and saving faith will always prove useless. Trying to acquire faith in a way God has not established will always end in futility; it will not do, and it will lead to condemnation. Amos says it this way: "They shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD (that Word which replenishes faith), but they shall not find it." And so, the five

who were unprepared, they *are indeed* awakened in the resurrection – isn't that a reminder that the resurrection is not the focal point of the Gospel?, for *all* will rise – even the wicked will rise from the dead, but they had not focused on the focal point of the Gospel – Christ! – the bridegroom coming at a time in which there is no patience for idolatrous sloth or distracted delay... and the idolatrous and distracted wicked are locked out of the banquet and know not life everlasting and the eternal wedding feast therein.

Now, it may seem that there is not much Gospel in this text (because we sinners wonder if we're the five wise or five foolish!)... and, truth be told, on the surface of the parable, there's not. Sometimes, we need to hear the Law. Sometimes, Jesus must simply forewarn us of the dangers of complacency and distraction because He sees it pour forth from us in so many ways, as we appeal to God's Gospel as license for sloth and laziness and hand-wringing over worldly ills.

But, note it well, God's day of Grace does not give you license for a season of sloth, nor does it give you reason to let down your guard against false doctrine... or to love the godless world and become despondent by its broken promises or afraid of its fallen nature; or to have hollow and clanging words of praise He *doesn't want* replace the repentance He *demand*s and the forgiveness He *promises*.

Hopefully it has become abundantly clear: Jesus' parable is not necessarily about five faithful and five who had never been faithful. Even the foolish virgins had a lamp and perhaps even an original measure of oil; even they initially had a portion of faith ("our lamps are going out!")... they wouldn't have waited for the Bridegroom in the first place if there wasn't initially faith. What made them foolish is that they did not see how much they depended on replenishing their oil throughout life's days, sustaining their eager anticipation despite life's distractions, and keeping focused on the Bridegroom's promised coming. The *wise* virgins understood how important it was to safeguard and cherish the oil that was so important for them to enter the banquet; the foolish virgins complacently assumed they'd always have enough oil; faith would never run out, didn't need to be strengthened, would simply always remain without caring for it.

Perhaps (as I've said before) we would take this parable more seriously if it were known as "five wise Lutherans and five foolish Lutherans." Friends, you *have* the Gospel. You have a God who does not constantly require of you, "You must do this; you must do that. Save yourself, prove your righteousness, prove your perfection... then I can save you." Rather, He who died on the cross to atone for your sins and purchase the oil of faith He has given to you in Baptism also desires to replenish your oil of faith with His gifts of Word and Sacrament, and He simply says, "Trust me. Learn from me. Take

these gifts that I freely give you and benefit from them... depend on them... cling to them... trust them... define your life by them, and – in the midst of this crumbling world – do not let them go.” Don’t let go of the pure Word preached; don’t become drowsy and slothful toward the Sacraments rightly and properly administered... don’t take for granted the importance of partaking in the holy things; for they are to you that which replenishes the oil of your lamp, that which brings you the benefits of Christ crucified, that which prepares you to accompany the Bride and Bridegroom to the wedding banquet of eternal bliss... *the wedding banquet to which the Bridegroom himself will bring His bride!*

And that is the implied Gospel in this very heavy Law text: The Christ who forewarns you to stay awake and keep watch is the same Bridegroom who sends His Holy Spirit to give you all you need to replenish and strengthen your faith. He gives baptism to initially give you oil for your lamp; He gives you absolution and the preached Word to be the light unto your path, and the Holy Supper to sustain your oil lamp. Christ even gives you this Divine Service wherein He himself comes to serve you with all His precious faith-nurturing and faith-sustaining gifts of Word and Sacrament.

And He does it all because His promise still today – still after 2000 years of delay – His promise still stands firm: He is coming. He will bring you out of this vale of tears and unto Himself. The Bridegroom is coming to usher His Bride into the eternal banquet.

For those to whom He has supplied His light in the oil of faith, the day of the LORD need not be darkness... for that dark day through which we tread, that darkest day of judgment by which the world will one day be enveloped... that same final day is lighted by the light of Christ, and all those whose lamps have been kept replenished with the oil of faith will rejoice when they are awakened from their graves to hear the cry: "Here is the Bridegroom! Come out to meet Him!"

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

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