

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Last Sunday of the Church Year – November 26, 2023
Matthew 25:1-13 – The Ten Virgins
Rev Peter Wagner

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

If a bridegroom shows up late to his wedding, he's going to hear about it from the bride for the rest of his life. But in our case, the bridegroom is the Son of Man. He comes to his bride the church at exactly the right time. He was delayed because he was preparing a place for her, and he was giving her time to ready herself for the wedding, and he was defeating all her enemies.

Jesus has betrothed his bride the church to himself by the pledge of his own blood, poured out on the cross. And the wedding we look forward is the consummation of that pledge.

So Christ is the bridegroom, the bride is the church, and the ten virgins are her bridesmaids. They are friends who tend to her needs, who prepare her for the wedding, and they rejoice to participate in it. The ten virgins are especially all ministers, servants of the word entrusted with the light of preaching and proclaiming the gospel to the church. But the ten virgins also include all Christians, all who minister to the church and will one day partake of the wedding feast.

What about the oil? What did the bridesmaids lack? Oil is whatever is needed to keep the light of the gospel shining. It has been interpreted in many ways: faith, or love, or good works, or hope. But really, the oil is all the above. Everything that keeps the lamps burning, that keeps the truth of the gospel shining into the black night of this world. Everything that keeps the hope of the bridegroom's coming shining before the church's eyes.

The bridesmaids who had plenty of oil were wise. The bridesmaids who didn't have it were unwise. So what they lacked was wisdom. We could say the oil is wisdom, first of all. Wisdom to walk in the knowledge and fear and love of God. To walk in the light of Christ and illuminate the darkness. Perhaps Jesus had Proverbs 21:20 in mind when he told this parable. "Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man's dwelling, but a foolish man devours it."

Wisdom is key. "Get wisdom," says Proverbs, "And whatever you get, get understanding."

But how do we get the oil of wisdom? How do we get understanding? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, says Proverbs. Because if you fear God you will take the Ten Commandments seriously. Fearing God's wrath drives us to repentance. "God threatens to punish all who break his commandments, therefore we should fear his wrath and not do anything against them." A healthy fear of God's wrath and being shut out on judgment day brings us to repentance, and to realize we cannot save ourselves.

So the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, because it prepares our hearts for the light of the gospel. Fearing God leads us back to the church in repentance, seeking forgiveness. It leads us back to Jesus. And when Jesus finds us here, he comes to us not in wrath, but in love. For we belong to his beloved bride. He who purchased us is glad to forgive us. He teaches us to love and trust in him, to turn to him at all times when we fail to obey the commandments. To turn to him not in fear, but in love, trusting his forgiveness. Perfect love drives out fear.

This is why the Bible describes Christ as the wisdom of God incarnate. Wisdom in the flesh. Christ is the wisdom of God and the power of God. Because to fear, love, and trust in Jesus is to have wisdom, to have the light of the world. It is to have forgiveness, a lamp with plenty of oil.

To fill our lamps with oil is to seek the wisdom of God in Christ. It's to remain in him, to keep refreshing ourselves with his gifts. To have plenty of oil is to keep getting wisdom, keep going to church, keep hearing and meditating on God's word. Wisdom is staying in the church, where Jesus promises to be, awake in Christ as members of his body, his bride.

But foolishness is to think you don't need the church, you don't need the oil of the Anointed One in his word and sacrament. Foolishness is thinking you can do pretty well on your own. Reading your Bible at home, praying alone, listening to sermons on the radio, all of these are good, but they aren't enough. This is not wisdom, this is not sufficient oil. You cannot fill yourself up. No one has enough oil inside himself to keep burning, everyone needs to be refilled from the outside with the wisdom of the fear and love of God in Christ Jesus.

So keep coming and receiving the gifts. Let Christ refill your lamp. You were first anointed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and you need him continually to give his healing and forgiving oil. Come to your Lord in the

church to receive his wisdom. Not merely going through the motions, but being awake and alert in the life of the congregation, in faith and communion with one another. Absorb every bit of oil you can in the sermon, in the sacraments, in Bible study, and in conversation together, so that you are well supplied.

And stay awake! Be ready! The Son of Man comes for you when you do not expect – at the end of days or the end of your days. Be ready by seeking Jesus. Seek him in his word and sacraments. Be in the church now, while the doors are open, so that you are never caught outside on the last day when the doors are shut.

“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.” “Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation.” Seek God’s oil in his word. Apart from Christ and his church your lamp will go out.

The problem is that we all fall asleep. Every one of the ten virgins, both wise and foolish, they all slept. The only difference was that the wise virgins were prepared with more oil. So we all sleep. We all fall away. We all go through times of spiritual drought. Times of just passing through the motions in church, showing up on Sunday without actually repenting of our sins or believing the forgiveness offered here.

It’s a good thing that there is one who does not sleep, one who does not slumber. Our bridegroom, the Christ. As he told the disciples in Matthew 26, right after this parable of the ten virgins. He said in Gethsemane, “Stay awake. Watch and pray that you do not fall into temptation!” But they all slept. Just like the ten virgins and just like us. Yet Jesus stayed awake for them. He stayed awake and watched and prayed for us, for the church. “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.” He prays for us now that when we when we fall asleep, we may wake again in his wisdom. Out of his great love he prayed, sweating blood, as he prepared to go to the cross to pay the bridal price for us.

That bridal price was his own blood, to purchase the church, and give her his oil. With that oil, we can endure. When we fall into slumber in this life, our Lord will not snuff out the smoldering wick. He keeps our lamp burning, he wakes us up when we get drowsy. And when we sleep in death at the end of our lives, he will wake us to eternal life.

On that day, when he comes, the cry will go up, “Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!” At that moment, thanks to the precious oil of Jesus, we will awake to eternal joy. Not to the gut-wrenching panic that our lamps are going out, not to be shut outside, but to the joyous song of the wedding procession. Our Lord is come at last, the marriage feast of the Lamb is here. Now enter all the wedding hall to eat the supper at his call. Rejoice with him in his brilliant presence forever. No longer will we rely on dim lamps in the darkness. Christ himself arises like the sun, filling all the new heavens and new earth with his radiant light.

May he fill our lamps with all we need to keep faithful till that day. And may he come quickly! Come soon, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.