

Sermon Last Sunday of the Church Year 2020

November 22, 2020

Matthew 25:1-13

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson which was previously read.

Sometimes when our Lord speaks in parables, the point of the parable isn't exactly clear. Today's parable is the opposite. Jesus gives the summary in verse thirteen and we need to hear it, to know it, to inwardly digest it, and to store it up in our hearts: **"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."** Jesus' return could be anytime now, so we must keep our hearts attuned to the faith so that we are ready when that time comes.

But as Jesus makes this point, he does so within the context of this parable, this story, about a wedding. There's the wedding, there are the attendants, there are the lamps and the oil. I think a lot of it doesn't make sense to our ears. So, how do we understand all of this?

Well, to start, we have to understand a bit about weddings at that time. You see in the first century in Israel, weddings were a bit different than we have them today, as I'm sure you gathered just from hearing the reading. We think of weddings in view of this context of romance. You have this couple who meets, who finds attraction, who dates, falls in love, and when they decide the time is right, they get married. All the more now, there's usually this period of testing the waters by moving in together, or even an avoidance of the actual marriage itself, for a commitment just of the heart and what we often call love.

At the time of Jesus, this wasn't how it worked. Now, to be fair, I think there are some ways that today is better. At that time marriages were arranged by the parents of the pair getting married, something that admittedly doesn't sound enticing. But, to be fair, parents do care for their children and do want what's best for them, and in light of that, many marriages did grow into very loving relationships. But lest, we get ahead of ourselves and this parable, it was that arrangement that began the process. The parents would agree to the marriage. Then, there was the betrothal. This betrothal was much more than engagement is for us. In our day engagement is fairly serious, but breaking them isn't horribly uncommon. At that time, the engagement was contractual. If an engagement was broken, that breaking occurred through a decree of divorce. This is what you see Joseph pursuing with Mary when it comes to his attention that she's pregnant with Jesus.

After the betrothal period, something that could last up to a year, but with the couple still living in their parent's homes, then the wedding. Now the preparation for the wedding

would have been happening during this year. The husband would have been preparing for them to have their life together. He would have prepared a home for them, like Jesus references when He speaks of going to prepare a place for us in John 14.

And when, finally, the day came, the bride would be brought to the home. She would be brought to the home to await the coming of her bridegroom. In the parable, she's there already waiting. But then you have the attendants. Apparently ten attendants was a lot, so this indicates the wedding is a really big deal. But you've got these attendants and they're there to celebrate the coming of the groom.

Now, it was apparently also common for these weddings to happen after sundown to aid those traveling in being able to get there, perhaps after working in the light of the day, or if traveling from a distance, being able to travel in the light of the day. So the groom would come later, such that time would be given the guests to arrive. However, things didn't really get rolling until the groom came.

In this parable, though, it appears the groom was delayed. It's not clear why, but it must have been important. Just like now, it's not as though the groom would unintentionally dawdle to delay the start of things. So, whatever is causing him to tarry is necessary. During that time, though, the attendants are to still attend.

And that's where we come to the detail and heart of the parable. There these attendants are, and you have the ten of them. They're there waiting and waiting and waiting. They're waiting so long, in fact, that they all fall asleep. Now, if you watch my devotions, you know I made the point that this falling asleep isn't the issue. You know, the point of this parable isn't that we as Christians should never sleep, but try to stay awake all the time. Even as we hear Paul talking about us not being asleep in the epistle lesson, he's speaking figuratively in the same vein that the parable is speaking. No, the sleeping isn't the issue. Instead, it's the preparation. Instead it's what happens once the bridegroom is at hand.

And what's that? Well we see in the parable this alarm that the bridegroom is coming. And we see that there are these five virgins who are prepared, having brought an extra flask of oil. These are wise attendants, they knew their jobs and made sure to do them. Then there are the foolish ones. In the Greek, they're called *morai*, morons. Why are they morons? Because they didn't come prepared. They weren't ready to do their job. And so, they have to run off and get more oil.

Now as we say this we can get caught up in asking questions like, "wasn't it selfish that the wise virgins didn't share?" Or "Could they really have gotten oil from sellers at that time of night?" These things miss the point. What is the point? They weren't ready. The

bridegroom came and they had been unwise and so they weren't ready to welcome him a right. And this was an insult. It was so insulting that when they get back, they aren't allowed into the feast.

So, how do we translate this for ourselves, then? I think you get the general point, this is telling us that we need to be ready for when Jesus comes back. But what does that look like?

Well I had a great experience with that this week. We were sitting down at the table for breakfast and our older kids told our youngest to repeat what he had just told them. And what was that? He said, "I want to go to heaven." Actually, he said, "I want to go to Amma and Papa's" that's his grandparents, but then he said, "but I really want to go to heaven." Now, it might be easy to say, "well but he's just three, he doesn't understand what death really is or what heaven really is." And in terms of our rationality, there's something to that. But when it comes to true faith, he gets it. He trusts my wife and I when we say, "as much as you like treats and fun here, it will be even better with Jesus. And Jesus being there will be the best part of all." Why don't we have that attitude? Because we don't really think it will be better. We think the pleasures of this life are the be all end all. We think that the treats and the toys of this life are as good as it gets. We think that enjoyment that comes from breaking the commandments is better than keeping them, and that the righteousness that comes from being a good person of our own strength is better than the righteousness Jesus gives to us. By that I mean, we like to say that it's good that Jesus forgives our sins, but we like to think that those sins aren't that bad and of course He would.

And so how much are we like those moronic virgins? How much are we actually not prepared for our Lord's coming? Look at us. Like I said last week, look at how we put our trust into politics. Look at the reactions to the virus. As I say this, I hate that I always have to qualify what I'm saying, but especially with the increase in cases, we need to be taking caution. We need to be caring for our neighbors and taking care, especially in view of increased hospitalization numbers. But look at the great fear that dominates this so much. How many of us really look at this say, "I want to go to heaven?"

Sure, it's OK for us still to want to go to "Amma and Papa's" or whatever those joyous things we have on earth are. It's OK for us want to see our children get married, to meet our grandchildren and have time with them. It's OK for us to want to enjoy some things yet. But it's not OK for us to want that more than to want to be with our Lord. It's not OK for us to fear death more than we hope in the joy that is to come with Jesus. It's not OK for us to fear things in the future more that we trust in Christ's care for us.

You see, what's the point of Jesus coming and dying for our sins? What's the point our bridegroom coming to this world at the first Christmas to betroth Himself to us, dying the death we deserve, but rising to new life and ascending to heaven to prepare the home for us? It's so that He can take us there. It's because He is that groom who, despite tarrying for some important necessity, can't wait for us to be in the feast with Him. He doesn't want to look through the door and say "I don't know you." No, He wants us in the feast with Him.

And as I speak of that feast, I've probably mentioned this before, but I'm always reminded of the wedding of some friends of ours of Indian heritage. You see in India, it's still common to have very grand wedding feasts, lasting even up to a week as was often the case in the times of Christ. And this wedding was a feast. For an evening and two full days we feasted. It was food buffet after food buffet after food buffet. Oh it was glorious. And Scripture tells us our eternity with our Lord will be a feast. It will be even greater. Or as we look at feasting for thanksgiving this week, it will be far beyond that. Isaiah 25 calls it a feast of rich food, of aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well-refined.

And the best part then will be that our groom will be with us. It will be the feast of our eternal union with Him, where we will not be divided from Him by our sin, by the suffering and pain that sin brings, by the division and turmoil that comes with it, nor by coronaviruses. No, it will be us with Him, where He will come to us, having cleansed us from every offense against Him, and He will wipe away our every tear.

Christians, what a joy that will be. We can see why He calls us to be watchful for it. In His love for us, He wants us there and He doesn't want us to miss out on it. He even blesses us with the foretaste of it in His feast here at His rail. Be prepared Christians. Whatever distracts you from that preparation, strip it away. In place of sins and earthly pleasures, put in your lamp repentance, faith, love, humility, watchfulness and sobriety. And most of all hope for that time. Fill that lamp that you will be ready for the day of His arrival. As the point of the parable says, **"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."** You don't know when it will be. And sometimes you'll doze off waiting for it. But keep that lamp full by His Word, by His gifts to you, keep it filled with the things to which He calls you in His promises. And keep it filled with those promises most of all. Because He wants you at that feast with Him, where He can show His love to you in caring for you eternally. Amen.