**Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost**

**November 8, 2020**

**Text—Matthew 25:1-13**

My dear friends in Christ, it’s the final countdown. We are rapidly approaching the end of the 2019/2020 church year. Three weeks from today, we will celebrate the First Sunday in Advent, and a new church year will begin. But before we do that, we still have three more Sundays to go, including this one. In previous years, you may have noticed that the Gospel readings for these final Sundays of the church year are primarily concerned with the end times. This is only natural, as an end times focus meshes well with the end of the church year, and it transitions seamlessly to Advent, in which we also are waiting for the Savior’s coming. This year is no exception to the rule, as the Gospel lessons for these final three Sundays all are Jesus’ parables about the end times taken from Matthew 25. So we have a great opportunity not only to talk about the end times and the return of Jesus, but also to do this based on a single chapter of Scripture.

The three parables that we will read over these next few weeks are the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the Parable of the Talents, and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. All of these parables have a distinct end times flavor, but what also is interesting about them is that they all address the theme of sorting. Specifically, the people in each of these parables are sorted and judged according to some kind of standard set for them. Those who are judged worthy are rewarded, while those who are judged unworthy are punished. Although each parable contains very different imagery, I would submit to you that the basic issue is the same in all of them. The people in the parables are judged according to different standards every time, but they all translate to the same standard in the judgment of the real world. And that standard is the same as it has always been: faith in Jesus Christ.

To be sure, each parable addresses faith in a different aspect of Jesus’ person and work, but nonetheless, it all comes back to faith. So let’s take a look at our first parable and see how it encourages us to have faith in Jesus Christ. The Parable of the Ten Virgins starts off with a wedding party, ten virgin girls who are waiting for the groom to show up so they can march in his parade. This was standard wedding practice at the time, and it roughly translates to having bridesmaids at a wedding in our day, except the girls were with the groom. So I guess we could call them groomsmaids. But anyway, these ten virgins were supposed to march with the groom in his parade to go get his bride, marry her, and have a feast to celebrate. Since this was taking place in the evening, they had all brought lamps with them, but only five of the ten had brought extra oil along. They figured that the groom would show up on time, so there wasn’t any need for them to be ready to wait for a while. Well, the groom did not show up on time, but was delayed, and so all of the girls fell asleep while they were waiting. At midnight, the cry went up through the town, “Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” So the ten virgins all got up and prepared their lamps, but the five without extra oil found that their lamps had gone out, and they couldn’t see. So they asked the five wise virgins to give them some of their oil, to which they replied that there wasn’t enough for everyone, so they should go to the store and get some of their own. While the foolish virgins were buying oil, the groom showed up, and the wise virgins marched with him and were allowed into the feast. The foolish virgins then showed up at the feast and tried to get in, but the groom told them that he did not know them and would not allow them to enter. So the wise virgins got to party at the wedding feast, while the foolish virgins were literally left out in the cold.

Thus far the Parable of the Ten Virgins. Obviously, these ten virgins in the parable were sorted, or judged, by whether or not they were ready to receive the bridegroom when he came. In the world of the parable, this was symbolized by the oil they had or did not have in their lamps. But what does this mean in the real world? How is the kingdom of heaven like those ten virgins in the bridegroom’s procession? Well first of all, I would submit that we shouldn’t try to find a one-to-one correspondence between the oil specifically and something in the real world. When we do that, we end up running down all kinds of rabbit holes. Is the oil faith? If we argued that the oil represents faith, then we have to ask ourselves where the foolish virgins possibly could have gone to “buy” it. The faith store? Is that Mardel’s? Is it CPH? Or is it the church? Well maybe, but you don’t buy faith at church; you just receive it. So, it can be difficult to say that the oil itself actually represents a specific thing. Rather, it makes more sense for us to look at the general situation; namely, that the five wise virgins were ready for the bridegroom when he came, while the five foolish ones were not. The wise virgins understood that the groom might be delayed for any number of reasons, while the foolish ones did not even consider this possibility. Thus, when the bridegroom was delayed, the wise virgins were prepared, and the foolish ones weren’t. The oil itself is just the parable’s way of calling attention to this dynamic of preparedness versus unpreparedness.

So then we ask ourselves, how does one become prepared in the real world? How should we be ready for Jesus’ coming, so that we will be allowed into his wedding feast when he arrives? Well, ironically, the answer is, in fact, faith. The oil itself does not represent faith, but the wise virgins’ overall preparedness to receive the bridegroom does represent faith. The wise virgins were ready to join the bridegroom’s procession when he arrived, and didn’t need to do anything else to prepare themselves. In the same way, those who trust in Jesus Christ, those who believe that his death and resurrection are for them, will be welcomed into his victory parade when he returns to earth. As St. Paul says in Galatians 2:16, “we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” Faith is how we get ready; faith is how we are prepared to receive Jesus. We believe his promises to us, and we wait eagerly for their fulfillment when he returns on the last day. We know that he is preparing a wonderful, endless wedding feast for us in his eternal kingdom, and we are looking forward to that with great anticipation. We will not be foolish and unprepared for his coming; we will not allow the pleasures of the world to distract us or other belief systems to make us doubt the truth of his Word. We will be ready to receive Jesus when he arrives, because we believe his promises. We are prepared for him when we have faith in his Word.

And this faith involves not only trust that he is coming back, but also the understanding that he may be delayed in his return. Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 24, “Stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming…you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” To be fully prepared to receive Jesus when he arrives, we need to take this statement seriously. The earliest Christians were absolutely convinced that Jesus was going to come back in their lifetimes, and they lived every day as if he would. Obviously, that didn’t happen, but their attitude was nonetheless the correct one. In the same way, we Christians in the twenty-first century should also live as if Jesus will return at any moment, because he very well could. He will come at a day and an hour that we do not expect. That could happen much sooner than we think, or it could take a lot longer than we think. The most important thing for us is to believe that he is returning, and to take seriously the fact that we don’t know when that will be. The temptation for us is to look at every event that happens in the world: every pandemic, every instance of social unrest, every election result as a sign that Jesus is coming back right now, and then when he doesn’t, we may get confused. We may think that if it didn’t happen after *this*, then there’s no way it’s ever going to happen. That would be a huge mistake. Faith in Jesus’ Word also involves believing him when he says that he is coming back at a time we do not expect, and nobody except God knows when that day or hour will be. So, as Jesus says, we will watch and keep ready, knowing that it could happen a thousand years from now, or it could happen right as I finish this sentence.

Regardless of when Jesus does come back, we know that when it happens, it will be a wonderful day indeed for the wise virgins, for those who trust in Jesus and are watching for his coming. For when he does return, he will come with the whole heavenly host of angels and make it clear to every single person that he is God and Lord. Then he will raise all the dead for judgment, and gather his faithful people into kingdom. He will judge us worthy not because of anything we have done, but because of what he has done to save us by his death and resurrection. And then all of us who have believed in him will be brought into his eternal wedding feast, a party that will make even the most expensive earthly weddings seem cheap and paltry by comparison. We will celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb in his kingdom forever, and nothing will be there to take our joy away from us. The return of Jesus Christ holds no terror for believers, because we know that we are prepared to receive him, and we will thus be welcomed into his wedding feast. He knows us and we know him, and he has a place at his table specifically prepared for each and every one of us. You believe in him, you trust in his Word, so you have eternity at his wedding feast to look forward to.

It’s obvious then that being like the wise virgins is the right thing for us to do. It’s obvious that we want to be prepared for the bridegroom’s arrival. It’s obvious that we want to be let into his wedding feast as his registered guests. So then do what you have always done: have faith in the Word and promises of the Lord. Believe that he died and rose again for you, believe he is coming back at the appointed time, and believe also that this time may be a lot sooner or later than any of us might think. Remain vigilant and watchful for his coming, and you will be like those wise virgins who were prepared to receive the bridegroom when he arrived. Your faith will make you ready, and your many days spent here receiving God’s Word and Sacrament will strengthen and preserve that faith until that final day. God himself has prepared you to receive his Son when he arrives. Embrace his gifts, remain strong in the faith, and you will see the fulfillment of Jesus promises to you on the last day. Amen.