

**Pentecost 23A + November 12, 2017**

**Matthew 25:1-13**

Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI

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At this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus been trying to teach his disciples about his return, which some traditions call the Second Coming. In our second reading we heard Paul's vision of what this will be like: "For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven." The dead will be raised first, he tells us, and then all who are alive. We will meet the Lord in the air, and we will be with him forever. We affirm this every week in our liturgy: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

Jesus is especially concerned about the consequences of not being ready for this great event, so he tells stories about readiness. Preparedness. Since the events of last Sunday, many of us have been thinking about those words in a more urgent way. What happened at the small church in Texas could happen anywhere. How can a church ever be prepared for such a thing? What are we to do?

Most congregations aren't able to hire armed security guards like some larger churches are doing. It's no laughing matter, but at Lydia Group this week I said that maybe we should give Gary or Vi Pankonien a baseball bat, since they are often standing watch at the back of the church—or at least the golf club that Pattye has in the office to whack unwanted intruders. She actually has one, just take a look behind her desk to the

right. And we definitely can't let fear get the better of us, locking ourselves in our homes, and being afraid to go to church or anywhere else, because that's no way to live.

What are we to do? We can be on the alert. We can call 9-1-1. But there's no way to prevent a mentally deranged person with access to firearms from inflicting great harm on people in public places, if that's what they decide to do. And a church is a public place, where *all* are welcome, which is why we cannot be locking our doors, certainly not on Sundays.

What are we to do? Specifically, what are people of faith to do? The answer Jesus gives us in our Gospel text is: Prepare ourselves for his return. This means not only living according to the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, but also to prepare our spiritual house for him as if he were coming any day now.

This is the point of Jesus' exquisite story of the ten bridesmaids in our Gospel reading today. Getting ready will be like this, he says: We are to be eagerly expectant and do everything we can think of to prepare to present ourselves to welcome Jesus.

In this parable, Jesus is represented by the bridegroom. There are 10 bridesmaids who are in charge of welcoming the bridegroom to the great wedding banquet, who represent us. The question is: Are we among the foolish ones, or the wise ones?

The story revolves around the bridegroom's delay. Today that would be unthinkable, except maybe in the movies. But in Middle Eastern culture, the bridegroom

was often delayed because financial arrangements for the marriage hadn't been completed yet.

Five of the bridesmaids, the wise ones, anticipate this delay. When all ten go out to the place where they are to meet the bridegroom and escort him to the wedding banquet, these five come prepared. They have taken the precaution of bringing along extra oil for their lamps, which they end up needing because the delay is longer than anticipated.

The five foolish bridesmaids failed to do this. Not only did they not think ahead to bring along more oil, but they end up missing the bridegroom altogether. When he finally came, they were still out buying extra oil. And despite their pleas to the other five to share their extra oil, the wise bridesmaids were right not to do so. It's not a moral but a spiritual issue: Either prepared, or you're not. You are either a disciple, or you're not. There's no in between. Any faith that is half-hearted is not faith, it's probably just trying to work itself out.

What are the consequences of not being ready? Picture the work of our altar guild. Every week, it's someone's job to re-fill the altar candles and candelabras. If they do, the candles burn brightly for the entire service. The light of Christ spreads throughout our sanctuary. If they don't, the candles go out somewhere in the middle, or maybe they won't even light at all, and there's no time to refill them. I'll bet that has never happened here, not even once. Our altar guild is always prepared.

The consequences for the foolish bridesmaids are dire. When they finally arrive with their oil, they find the door to the banquet hall has been closed. They are shut out. Worse yet, when they beg to be admitted—“Lord, Lord, open to us”— they are met with these chilling words from the bridegroom: “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.”

This parable is a metaphor for the delay of Jesus’ return to earth. Shortly after Jesus’ death, his followers believed his bodily return would come soon. But years, then decades, then centuries and now millennia have dragged on. Now more than 2,000 years later, we are still waiting. We know he will come, because we affirm it in our liturgy every Sunday: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. But no one knows when, not even Jesus himself—only God the Father.

This delay is one of the great challenges of the Christian faith. What can we do? Listen to the first stanza of the Advent hymn by great 17<sup>th</sup> century hymn writer Paul Gerhardt. He poses the question, and then gives us the answer:

The question: “O Lord, how shall I meet you, how welcome you aright?”  
The expectation: “Your people long to greet you, my hope, my heart’s delight!”  
The prayer: “O kindle, Lord, most holy, your lamp within my breast,”  
and the course of action: “...to do in spirit lowly all that may please you best.”

What would please Jesus? A spiritual wakefulness. An awareness of the needs of those around us. An attentiveness to the suffering of the world. Involvement with those who are suffering, through acts of kindness and mercy that spring naturally from faith. Being attuned to injustice here and everywhere, and doing something about it.

Advocating of behalf of the oppressed, so that they may walk freely and live fully with all of God's children. Only through the work of our hands will God's justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

We make ourselves ready in all these ways because we know Jesus and he knows us, and because we love him and desire to honor his love for us. In so doing, we participate in God's great work of salvation as we help bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth. God needs each of you for this great work of salvation, each in your own way. Let us go forth in the name of Christ, prepared to meet him at any moment.

AMEN.