

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

34th Sunday of Quarantine (36 Overall)

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Amos 5:18-24

Pslam 70

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

11/08/2020

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 1“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ 10And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ 12But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ 13Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

### **Focus**

Good morning! How diligent are you? Can you accomplish a task with will power alone? Are you the type of person who can do those things that require you to focus for an extremely long time? It may come as no surprise, but I am typically not that type of person. Having Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder means that something that requires long term focus is usually beyond me... with a few exceptions. You see, people with ADHD have this weird gift where they can hyper focus on something that really interests them.

For me, one of those areas has always been detailing a car. Professional detailers talk about “chasing paint perfection” in terms of percentages. 100% is impossible. After a drive through a touchless car wash you hit maybe 60%. People who wash their cars by themselves hit around 75%. But for those of us who want to be in that 90% area, it’s a law of diminishing returns. Each little bit of improvement takes drastically more work, experience, and focus.

So, in seminary during the winter break I decided to see how “perfect” I could get my Pontiac Grand Am GT. I ended up spending around 30 hours on just the exterior of the car throughout a 2 week period. The car had this gorgeous orange metallic paint that just popped. Washing the car was the easy part! I wet sanded the paint to remove all the high spots, compounded the paint, and polished it to “perfection.” During those hours and hours of work, it became a challenge to stay focused, to make sure you don’t cut corners. When I was done, the paint was like a mirror. It looked amazing.



I am still surprised that I was able to stay focused for the required time. Because if I'm honest, long term concentration is not a skill I usually have. I would be like the bridesmaids who fell asleep, waking up surprised and unprepared when the bridegroom showed up.

It's a weird story we have before us today. Jesus begins by telling us that the kingdom of heaven will be like this parable... from that point on it gets strange. Even after a few reads, the story still sounds odd. But in order to understand, we need to dive a little deeper. When Jesus died, was raised, and went to the Father, he left the disciples with the promise that he would return. The inconvenient thing is that he didn't tell anyone when that would be. But, for the apostles, the assumption was that it would be soon, like very soon. As in, probably-next-month-soon. As the early church grew, that

expectation of Jesus' return grew. By the time we get to St. Paul, which was roughly 30 years after the Resurrection, Jesus was overdue, the guy could be showing up at any second! Then, 20ish years later when the writer of the Gospel of Matthew began to put quill to parchment, the church was in a strange place. As the first generation of believers died, those who could give first-hand accounts of the life of Jesus realized they needed to write those stories down. It wasn't a concern in the beginning, Jesus was going to show up next Tuesday. (This is why St. Paul said not to get married. There just wasn't a point since this life was about to change anyway.) The church was forced to come to terms with the fact that we didn't really know WHEN Jesus was going to show up, and where the focus had been on staying the course, just keeping things going long enough for the return, they now shifted to long-term planning.

And so the church looked around and realized that the people of God needed to remain committed and focused. It was one thing to convert at the peak of a spiritual moment, it was very different to maintain that faith in the years after. The Gospel writer, when organizing the stories that were handed down, intentionally put this parable near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. The story today, found only in the Gospel of Matthew, is situated in a section that sees Jesus preparing the disciples for his departure.

A lot of time has been spent on speculation regarding deeper meanings in the story. What's the significance of the number of bridesmaids? Why five who are prepared, and why 5 who are not? What is the significance of the lamp? The oil? Why midnight? And why is the bridegroom delayed? Others ask questions like the one Harvey Marshall raised at Bible study on Monday: why didn't they share their oil? It seems awfully selfish and not very Christian to not help.

Unfortunately, none of the questions can really be answered, simply because the story isn't really concerned with those details. The great scholar Douglas R.A. Hare writes that *"It is better to take [them] not as allegorically but parabolically. The main point of the story is that the foolish virgins are not ready when the great moment finally arrives."*<sup>1</sup> At the end of the day, the story becomes about our own faith. Another scholar writes that *"Readiness in Matthew is, of course, living the life of the kingdom, living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount. Many can do this for a short while; but when the kingdom is delayed, the problems arise. Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year when hostility breaks out again and again, and the bridegroom is delayed. Being merciful for an evening can be pleasant; being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires preparedness."*<sup>2</sup>

But the good news is that we're not waiting alone. In fact, we still have time to check our list one more time before we need to set out. The church becomes a place of preparation, where we come together, making sure we have everything we might need for the journey ahead. So... are you ready? Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 285.

<sup>2</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 335.