

The Last Sunday of the Church Year  
November 26, 2017

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University Lutheran Chapel  
at the Chapel of the Cross  
Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

+ Jesu juva +

## PREPAREDNESS

Isaiah 65:17-25; I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:1-13

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

**O**ur Gospel lesson today is a parable about being prepared. You have a certain amount of time allotted to you to do so. And if you haven't gotten yourself prepared, you are going to be caught by surprise and it will be too late to prepare any more. There will be no place to hide, no time to prepare when that day comes.

But parables can be very difficult to interpret properly. The main point of preparedness is pretty easy to get, but the details of how one gets prepared are harder to understand and interpret. And if you get the details wrong, then you end up missing the main point too. For it does no good to tell someone to be prepared if they are going to have no idea how to go about doing it!

So what do all of these things represent in this parable? To begin with who are the ten virgins? The virgins are those who have dedicated themselves to the one for whom they wait. Now that one is Christ. So the virgins, then, must be all those who have been baptized and are now, outwardly at least, part of the Church. There are ten of them because ten is a number the Bible uses to signify completeness. So this is the whole number of the Church; all those who have been seen to be Christians by their participation in the Church. Now five of them, our Lord says, are wise; and five are foolish. The wise are those Christians who are people with real, living faith in Christ. They are genuine believers. The foolish are those who do not have a genuine faith in Christ, though they appear to be Christians outwardly, and may even think themselves to be real Christians. They too have been baptized. Some of them go to church, participate in Bible studies, bring dishes to the potlucks, etc. The point is you can't tell by looking at them which are the wise and which are the foolish. They all look like people dedicated to Christ. They look like virgins in spirit, avoiding the sins of this world, putting away all forms of idolatry against God, seeking to do good for their neighbors, etc.

And each of them also carries a lamp. Now a lamp is necessary if one is going to watch through the night. One could say perhaps that the lamp is the soul, which must be filled with living faith if it is to watch properly; or one could argue that the lamp is the outward faith itself, which is useful only if it is alive and burning

– a genuine faith as opposed to an outward one only. Either way, the lamp is a vessel, in other words, which when alive with the fire produces light that makes one prepared for the Bridegroom which is Christ.

The only thing that distinguishes the foolish virgins from the wise is that the foolish have not brought oil with them whereas the wise have brought oil. So this is the thing. Those that have oil are called wise, while those that do not have it are called foolish. Now obviously it would be foolish to bring a lamp without oil, right? But at the beginning of the parable, they all have lamps burning. It is only as they burn the oil they had that they find themselves in need of more oil to keep the lamps going. This is why the foolish say to the wise: “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” So even the foolish in this parable had a living faith at the beginning of the story, but they did not tend to it, did not provide what was necessary to keep that faith alive.

So what is the oil that keeps the soul alive with living faith, or keeps outward faith from being without real life? The oil is, of course, the Word of Christ, the Gospel that gives the grace upon which faith lives. Christ is the light which gives us light. The Holy Spirit is the fire which bestows His light and life to us. And He does this by means of the Word of God. The Word, then is the oil that when put to use by the faithful soul shines with the light of Christ and of life.

The point of the parable, then, is not just to be prepared somehow, but to be prepared by keeping and using and cherishing the Word of God. Every one of us will eventually face the last day. We don't have any idea exactly when it will happen, but one day when no one is expecting it (hence, at midnight) we will all hear the cry: “Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him.” And then we all, whether we still live or have been lying for years in our graves, will go out to meet Him and either be taken into heaven with Him, or will be shut out forever by Him. Once He has come, we will either be found prepared or not; and no matter how much the foolish cry out to Him for mercy then, it will be too late. “Watch”, our Lord says. Be prepared with a living faith fueled by His Word and grace.

St. Paul urges the same thing today. “But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly well that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.” You, knowing the warnings of the Scriptures and trusting in the promises of our Lord, should be prepared for this day. You know this day is coming.

So what is it that causes one to be unprepared. It can be a lot of different things. Neglect of the things of Christ and of His Word stands at the center, however. And this is often coupled with an idolatry of self or of vocation or of

stuff - being too attached to and too caught up in this stuff of this world. It can also happen when one is deceived into misbelief or even outright rejection of the Word of God or of the person or work of Christ. It can happen when one no longer trusts the forgiveness and grace of Christ. And all of these things are sin and of darkness.

But St. Paul says: "You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness." In Holy Baptism God has called you His own son. In that Sacrament you have put off the darkness and sin of this world and of your own flesh and you have been put into Christ, and have put on Christ who is the light of the world. By the Word that has been given you in Baptism you now know who you are. And knowing who you are informs the way you live your life. So Paul says: "Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober." We are not to lapse back into the way we used to be. We are not to fall asleep again in faith, we are not put our faith to death by sinful living and unbelief. But rather we are to be sober like people of the day, people who are fully aware of what is happening and of Who is coming.

And that, according to St. Paul is done by "putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation." Wear the armor God has given you by His Holy Word. Use the gifts of grace He gives you in His Church. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God, St. Paul tells us. He also teaches us that the Word makes one wise unto salvation. The Word of God also teaches us and empowers us to love by bestowing the love of Christ upon us.

Today is the last Sunday of the Church Year. We expect to begin another year next Sunday. But one day the counting of time will come to an end. The trumpet will sound, proclaiming that He comes. But for the faithful Christian there will be no need to panic and scurry about in futility. For with lamps aglow, faithfully believing the Word of Jesus and living in faith, we will be prepared.

And our Lord will always provide this Word to you. He offers you as much oil as you could ever possibly need for your lamps. And it's free to you, purchased by Christ Jesus through His suffering and death; given out through the power of His resurrection and through the sending of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord does not want to shut you out from heaven, but wants to count you among the wise virgins that enter the eternal marriage feast with Him, as members of His Bride. St. Paul says: "God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him." May our Lord keep us until that day. And may He come quickly. Amen. .

+ Soli Deo gloria +