

Pastor Geoffrey R. Boyle
22nd Sunday after Pentecost
9 November 2014
Grace and Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Matthew 25:1-13

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

Yesterday Nikki's sister in Michigan sent a picture showing a thin layer of snow on the ground. And here, beginning tomorrow night, the polar vortex will do its own damage. The ground is hardening, the leaves are changing; our side of the equator prepares for winter. And it's all appropriate as we also near the end of the Church year.

The readings over the next few weeks are all about the end:
the end of the Church Year,
the end of our lives,
and the end of the world as we know it.

We begin the Church Year with Advent, a season of preparation for the coming Christ child. Now we end it, preparing for Judgment. We look to the end, to the promised return of Christ. And we can't help but wonder what it'll be like. So Jesus tells us,

*"Then the Kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins
who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.
Five of them were foolish, and five were wise." (Mt 25:1-2)*

Now, there's absolutely no difference between the wise and the foolish in appearances. All ten virgins are invited to the feast and all ten go to meet the Bridegroom. All ten dressed to the nines. All ten came with lamps, set to party into the night. And all ten fell asleep, waiting. There's no difference between the wise and the foolish virgins—at least on the surface.

The so-called foolish virgins have made all the necessary preparations. They've dressed for the party to which they were invited. They brought a lamp, so that the afternoon festivities could carry into the night. For any *regular* party, this would've been just fine.

Now, the so-called wise virgins did everything just the same as the foolish, except that they looked to be foolish, as the lugged around all this extra—seemingly overkill—amounts of oil. For any *regular* party it would be nonsense to bring so much oil.

But that's just the point!

If you've made your way through any of this Church Year, you're well aware that our Lord rarely does anything *regular*.

He slaughters fattened calves for sons that wish He was dead.

He fills the halls of the wedding feast with any Tom, Dick, or Harry,
 whoever happened to be among the highways or by-ways as the invitation went out.
 He pays a day's wage to the guy who only works an hour;
 and forgives a man's debt who owe's five life-time's worth.
 Nothing is regular or ordinary about this Father, and this Bridegroom.

And that's what distinguishes the wise from the foolish;
 for the foolish are wise by the world's standards,
 while the wise are seen as utter fools.

With our Lord, everything gets turned on its head.

So the difference between the virgins comes when they're startled at midnight.
 Sure, all ten have disheveled hair.
 All ten have their make-up smeared and their dresses bunched from the slumber party.
 All ten eventually fell asleep in disappointment at the party that never came.
 But at the cry: "*Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet Him!*"
 all ten go to trim their lamps, and at the trimming of the lamps,
 the distinction between the wise and the foolish is revealed.

The wise have extra oil.
 The foolish don't.
 And there isn't enough to share.

It seemed crazy at the time to bring extra oil—who wants to lug that around a party all night?
 But now, at midnight—a strange time to start a party!—what oil dealer might possibly be open?
 Likely they went home at 6 for dinner with the family.

Now, really, whose fault is it?
 They did what made sense and seemed right.
 Who would've thought the Bridegroom would be late to His own party?
 Who could've imagined such a delay? Such a long night? Such a cold winter?
 Who would've thought the party would still come,
 when the darkness of night seemed to be all there is?

And for us, who would imagine that Christ will actually come again?
 Year after year, season after season, it just seems like it's all for naught.
 It's too long, and too hard to keep going sometimes.

The wisdom of this world has a point.
 Sure, Jesus said He'd come again—but I haven't seen Him, have you?
 It's been almost 2000 years since He made that promise.
 That's a long time!
 When Isaiah promised that the Virgin would conceive and bear a child,
 it only took 700 years for that promise to come true!
 700 years has already gone by twice, and is coming up on its third time around with this promise.

And so the world says:

*“Give up. No more preparations.
Drop your extra, senseless amounts of oil. Set your faith aside.
Don’t repent of your sin—you’re not poor, nor are you miserable.
Eat, drink, and be merry. For tomorrow we’ll die and the Lord isn’t coming.
So make the most of it.”*

Such is the wisdom of this world; and on the surface, it seems right.
And that’s why we must hear these parables of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.
For if we think the Kingdom of Heaven is different,
that it comes when we expect it, or that the wait will be easy,
then we’re sure to run out of oil.

But our oil is the faith that clings to this Jesus, this Bridegroom who is late for His own party.
And even though it all seems to be His fault—
that the oil of the foolish virgins would run out,
that the world would give up hope,
that the suffering would try to find their own end to this misery—
we cling to Him and His promise anyhow.

For this same delinquent and tardy Bridegroom is the One who came in the manger,
and carried the cross,
and bore the sin of the world.

He is the Christ who has died, and the Christ who is risen, and the Christ who will come again.
And for this we must be ready.

Someday, some time, some moment will finally be too late—even to believe.
The watchman calls, he warns, he pleads and begs:

“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (Mt 25:13)

To those without oil—
that is, without faith, without clinging to Him despite His obnoxiously long departure—
there is the final: *“Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.”*
Then, the door will be shut, without a second, or third, or a hundredth chance.
That’s the judgment.

So, dear Virgins, watch with the oil of gladness and faith.
Be wise in Christ, but fools to this world.
Repent and believe; for the Bridegroom is coming, and the feast is prepared.
Trim your lamps, and enter with joy into the wedding feast of the Lamb.
For He is yours and you are His.
And He is coming for you.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit