

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost/November 12, 2017
Matthew 25:1-13/Expect the Unexpected
Holy Spirit Lutheran Church
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“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

During these last few Sundays of the church year, the Gospel readings call our attention to teachings about the last days. As Jesus teaches His public preaching ministry is also coming to its last days. After a day of teaching in the Temple, Jesus and the disciples were on the Mount of Olives looking over the valley toward Jerusalem. In a few days, the authorities will arrest Him and then He will suffer and die on the cross.

Jesus taught His disciples many things about the Kingdom of heaven and about His suffering, death, and resurrection. Then, as He approached the cross, He taught about the final Day of Judgment.

As often happened, the disciples didn't understand at first. It was not until after the resurrection did they really began to comprehend. Although they did not always understand, Jesus continued to teach. He knew the day would come when the Holy Spirit would make the teachings clear. Then they would remember what He said.

The teaching about the Last Day in today's parable may be summed up as, “Expect the unexpected.” Jesus Himself explained this when He said, “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” Watch, be ready, like a boy scout and be prepared. Why, because the last day will be a surprise for everyone.

Jesus used the setting of a wedding celebration to make His point. Even today, we point to marriage as metaphor for the relationship

between Christ and His bride, the Church. In the first century Middle East, marriage traditions were an even clearer metaphor.

The key difference for today's parable is couples in the first century Middle East did not live together immediately after the wedding. There was a period of betrothal. The bride would return to her parents' home and wait for the groom to provide a place for them to live. Once the groom had a home for his bride, he would go to her and in grand procession with family and friends would escort the bride, her family, and friends to the couple's new home.

The ten virgins in today's parable were waiting for just such a procession. They were to escort the bride and the groom to their new home with a procession of light. Each of the virgins would light the way with her lamp and accompany the bride and groom as they entered the city, processed to their new home and celebrated the beginning of their new life together.

Of course, back in the day Jesus told this parable, there were no cell phones, texting, or e-mail to let anyone know about the bridegroom's progress. You knew he left to get his bride and he would return sometime in the next few days, but exact schedules were impossible. No one knew the travel conditions or how long it would be for the bride to gather her family and friends together. The groom might escort the bride into the village this afternoon, tonight, tomorrow sometime, or maybe even the next day. You just didn't know when the groom would show up with the bride until you saw them coming.

This image of the groom going away to prepare a place for the bride and then returning to take her home exactly matches the words of Jesus Christ to His disciple in the upper room, [John 14:2-3] "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a

place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

Just as the virgins had no idea when the bridegroom might return, so we have no idea when we might leave this world. Are we to leave when Jesus returns? He might come before I finish this sermon or he might come a thousands of years from now. Jesus Himself said, [Matt 24:36] “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”

On the other hand, if the Lord tarries, we will leave this world through the gate of death. Again, we have no idea if we will live through the day or go on living for many more years. Again Jesus said, [Matt 6:27] “Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?”

So, whether we leave this world when the Lord returns or whether we leave through the gates of death, it is very likely to be a surprise, an event that has little or no warning; an event that can be a disaster if we are not ready.

But what does it mean to be ready? The parable symbolizes readiness with oil. The prudent virgins had containers of oil with them and were ready to light the way for the happy couple. The foolish virgins had lamps, but no oil. When the watchman on the wall announced the appearance of the bridal party, the foolish virgins had to get oil. By the time they returned, they missed out.

The parable in today’s Gospel focuses on the return of the bridegroom for His bride, the Church. In order to understand what it means to be ready, we must ask a question. How the Holy Christian Church became betrothed to the Son of God?

Tradition called for a groom to pay a bride price for his future wife. The price would be things of commercial value such as livestock, crops, currency, and so forth. With the bride-price, the groom made the bride his own.

Jesus Christ paid a much greater bride-price for the Holy Christian Church. The Holy Spirit inspired Peter to write, [1 Pet 1:18-19] “You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.” These words teach us Jesus paid the bride price for the church not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. With His suffering and death on the cross, Jesus makes us His own. It was at the cross Jesus created the Holy Christian Church and made her into His holy bride. All the members of the Holy Christian Church are ready for His return.

We become members of the Holy Christian Church when the Holy Spirit worked through the Word of God to create faith in us. We remain in the Holy Christian Church as the Holy Spirit maintains our faith through that same Word. That Word of God comes to us as we read and hear it. It comes to us as we receive it with the waters of Holy Baptism and with the bread and wine of the Lord’s Table. With the Means of Grace the Holy Spirit maintains our readiness for our Last Day on this earth. With the Means of Grace, we will be ready even though our Last Day is a surprise.

The five foolish virgins in today’s parable represent all those who are not ready because they neglect the Means of Grace. They rejected the Word of God and so starve their faith. The foolish hear the most terrible words their Lord could utter, “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.” From these words we learn those who starve their faith to death will experience an eternity with no sense of God’s presence.

They will finally acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, but it will be too late. The door will be shut and no one will open it. They will suffer an eternity without the joy of God's presence.

On the other hand, the five wise virgins represent all those who cherish the Means of Grace. They abide in the Word; their faith is well nourished. The Holy Spirit works through Word and Sacrament to nourish and maintain their faith in Jesus Christ and His work. In today's parable, the prudent entered the wedding feast. These are the ones who are ready. They will rise from the dead to experience the eternal joy of God's presence.

They will rise from the dead because they will be following the one who opened the door with His own resurrection. Today, that door is still open, but the day is coming when it will close. Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.