

“NOW Is The Time”
Matthew 25:1-13

November 12, 2017

23rd Sunday After Pentecost

I think it was my stepmother who first noticed a particular character trait among the men in our family, including my father. She said, “All the Schlund men are born with the procrastination gene.” All the women who married into the Schlund family, including one sitting here today, concurred with her. The men, meanwhile, consider what she said and put off responding to her words until sometime later.

Procrastination is a fairly common occurrence. Perhaps it runs in your family, too. It refers to the practice of delaying an action until a later time and trying to do it then. Although procrastination can be very annoying for those waiting on action from a procrastinator, it often turns out to be fairly harmless. The work gets done at the last minute. However, sometimes procrastination – not doing something in the present time – can come back to bite you in the future. Time runs out before the procrastinated act is completed and there are consequences for that. For example, suppose you’re driving down the highway with the gas gauge pointing to “E” and, for some reason, you are procrastinating buying fuel. If you wait too long or just don’t do it, you’re going to find yourself stuck by the side of the road when the fuel is gone.

Procrastinating the acquisition of fuel is a key point in Jesus’ parable for today. Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to the story of a marriage celebration in Jewish times. Although we don’t know much detail about such celebrations, we do know that the culmination of the wedding celebration occurred when the bridegroom would come to the bride’s house to take her and her attendantes into the marriage hall for the great celebration.

The story begins with the young women who were attendants for the bride. They all have oil burning lamps because the bridegroom would arrive after dark and they would need the light to guide them into the wedding hall. Five of the young women are called foolish. Why? It is because, although they have oil lamps, they fail to bring any oil to burn in those lamps. Can you imagine anything quite as stupid? They perhaps were procrastinators who felt they could take care of the fuel issue when the bridegroom arrived. Five of the young women are referred to as wise. Why? It is because they had taken, not only the oil burning lamps, but flasks of oil to fuel their lamps. They not only did not procrastinate, but they prepared in advance for the bridegroom’s arrival.

The story goes on to say that the bridegroom was delayed in coming. So the ten young women became tired and fell asleep. At midnight, a most unexpected time, a cry goes out, “Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” In their drowsiness and darkness the young women get up. All of them prepare their lamps. However, only the wise young women are able to light their lamps to find their way. The foolish young women are unable to light their lamps and beg to borrow some oil from the wise young women. The wise young women do not lend them oil because they only have enough for themselves. While the foolish young women go off to the market to buy oil, the bridegroom arrives and those who were ready – the young women who prepared in

advance – were taken by the groom into the wedding hall. And the door was shut - to keep out of the wedding hall those who were not ready.. The foolish young women return and try to get in, but it is too late. the groom says, “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.”

Now what’s the problem here? Were the expectations of the groom for the young women unclear or unfair? Is the groom showing preferential treatment to some? Does the groom want only some of the attendants with him in the wedding hall, but not others? The answer to all of these questions is: no. After years of teaching and tradition, all ten of the young women knew what was expected of them in a wedding ceremony. They couldn’t say they didn’t understand. And the bridegroom wanted all of them in the wedding hall for the great celebration, but some were not ready – some had procrastinated in their preparation – when the bridegroom came.

This is a lesson, not only for the people of God at Jesus time’, but also for the people of God today as well. Jesus is the Bridegroom who has promised to come and claim His Bride – the Church – and her attendants, that is, her members. Like in the story, the coming of the Bridegroom, Jesus, has been delayed. We are called to be ever ready for the Bridegroom to come, for us to trim our lamps, and follow Jesus into, what the book of Revelation calls, “the marriage feast of the Lamb.” The question is: are you prepared to meet Him?

You and I are like the 10 young women in our story. Some are prepared. Some are not prepared. How is one truly prepared? In the story, all ten women had ten lamps which looked exactly the same. However, having a good looking lamp does you no good. For a lamp to be helpful, you must have fuel for it.

It is the same for us. All of us look like Christians. We come to church. We pray and sing. We try to be basically good people. But looking like Christians is not enough. For a Christian to be truly a Christian and prepared for the Groom, that Christian must have the “oil” needed to fuel the Christian.

But what exactly is that “oil”? People have interpreted this point in the parable in various ways The oil represents the Word of God, the sacraments, faith, good works, and so on. However, Jesus doesn’t assign any specific meaning to the oil and each of these proposed solutions has its weakness. But it is not really necessary to assign a specific meaning to this part of the parable.

Jesus is making two points about the “oil”. First, in general, the oil represents that which enlightens your way into the wedding hall of heaven. Both the young women in our story with their oilless is in the same represents the right races is Jesus a you as you will you will that is or is is and is that is is is is the number is in her and rules and they lack is that you use me as a is providing is a and later as later you will later be later the work is lamps and we today are empty vessels, who on our own, cannot enter into the wedding hall of heaven. We have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed.. We have not done it just occasionally, but we have done it often. Instead of being thought of like a beautiful bride, we are more like a sleazy prostitute - certainly not worthy of entering into the wedding hall.

What gets us into the wedding hall? What is the “oil”? To be intentionally vague, let us simply say that the oil represents the grace of God. By God’s grace, through

Jesus Christ, we are able to enter into the wedding hall. His grace has cleaned us up, forgiving our sins for the sake of His Son, Jesus, who offered His life on a cross to forgive our sin and make us his beautiful and treasured Bride. We are clothed with His holiness in our baptism. We are adorned with the jewels of His righteousness from the preaching and proclaiming of the forgiveness of sins in His Holy Word. We have the sparkling golden crown of life from His resurrection from death to life.

Some Christians, like the foolish young women, are foolish Christians. They look like Christians. They do a number of religious things like occasionally going to church, getting confirmed, keeping their names on the roles of a particular congregation, and so on. They lack any sort of “oil” to fuel their faith. They lack the grace of God because they failed to make use of the Means of Grace – God’s ways to provide us with His grace.. Like the foolish young women in our parable, they may think that they will have time later to rectify the situation. Later, they will be regularly involved in the worship of God. Later, they will be dedicated to reading and studying the word of God. Later, they will work on strengthening her faith. Later. However, those who procrastinate in this area are not ready for the Groom to come. And they will find that there will be no time when He comes to change the situation.

The story of the five wise young women is much more pleasant. Long before the bridegroom comes, they take advantage of the time and prepare for his coming. They keep a large supply of oil so that when the bridegroom comes in the middle of the night, they are ready with a lamp and are prepared with fuel to produce a bright light leading them from the darkness into the presence of the bridegroom. He will take them with him into the wedding hall and a great celebration. And the door will be closed in safety to keep inside those who were ready.

This is what awaits those Christians who are like the five wise young women. Christians who do not procrastinate but, long before Jesus returns, take advantage of the time they have to prepare for His coming. They keep an abundant supply of the grace of God with them all the time. Thus, they are always ready for the Bridegroom, Jesus, to return. Even if He comes at midnight, when He is least expected, the Christian who has the supply of the grace of God will be ready. The grace of God won for them by Jesus Christ will lead them through the darkness of sin and into the bright holiness of the wedding feast in heaven and a great celebration that lasts forever.

So Jesus concludes His parable with this warning and encouragement: “Watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” To watch for Jesus coming means to have an abundance of His grace – His undeserved love for us. The Good News is that we do not have to go searching for His grace now or hope to acquire it at the last moment when Jesus returns. God has established His Church here in this place is a sort of “spiritual service station” (what we would call a “gas station” years ago). Here, we can re-fuel our souls with the grace of God so that we will always be ready when He comes. Here, God’s grace flows abundantly in His holy Sacraments – Holy Baptism & the Lord’s Supper; in the reading and preaching of His Holy Word; in Sunday School and Bible Class. There will always be more than enough (oil) to fuel our faith and keep us burning brightly, as well as keeping us prepared for the Lord’s return.

So watch by keeping the flask of your life full of the “oil” of God’s grace. Get as much of the Word of God as you can, not the least amount as many so often do. Refill your flask every Sunday in Divine Service. Keep that flask full by setting aside time for personal devotions and by participating in various Bible Classes throughout the week.

Do not procrastinate in this area. Do not think that you have all the time in the world to consider acquiring and having the grace of God. There will come a time when, if you have not kept an abundance of God’s grace, it will be too late. Jesus warns, “for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

And do not think that you will be able to obtain the grace of God when Jesus returns. That’s the second main point in understanding the oil in the story. It is not determining exactly what the oil represents. Rather, Jesus is making the point that one person cannot be ready for another person. I cannot believe for you, nor can you believe for me. Parents cannot have faith for children and children cannot have faith for parents. I cannot experience the grace of God for you, nor can you experience it for me. Every person is ready on their own or, conversely, not ready on their own. No one can become ready for Jesus with a last-minute adjustment in their lives. Acquiring the “oil” of God’s grace is a lifelong style of living.

I was always going to give up procrastination, but I never got around to it. (Nor do I think my father or brothers ever did either.) Being a procrastinator in this life can be annoying or frustrating for those who have to deal with you. However, being a procrastinator in the life that is to come can be dangerous or eternally deadly. NOW is the time to prepare for our Lord Jesus Christ to come again. NOW is the time to acquire an abundance of the grace of God in order to be prepared for our Lord’s coming. No procrastinating or postponement. NOW is the time! Amen.