

**Matthew 25:1-13**

When will you die? At what time will your life here on earth come to an end? If you cannot give an answer to this question, then you need to listen to what Jesus has to say. “Keep watch,” He says, “because you do not know the day nor the hour.” Today is the Last Sunday in the Church Year. It’s good that we are here, for we will take the opportunity today to reflect on how we have lived during the past year; whether we have lived more like the five wise virgins, or more like the five foolish virgins. And as we reflect, may God lead us to repent of our spiritual laziness, and teach us to keep watch and wait with joy for the coming of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ.

There is something you should know about the ten virgins in our text. They do not represent all people. We give ourselves false hope when we think that the five wise virgins are those people who are baptized; those people who are connected, in some way, to the church... and that the five foolish virgins are all the rest; those people who have never set foot in the Lord’s House. But this is not so. The ten virgins do not represent all people. They only represent the baptized. The ten virgins are those people whose names are on the church roster; who have some connection with the church. The ten virgins are those people on earth who call themselves Christians. Of those within the visible church; of those who are the baptized; of those who call themselves Christian...there are wise virgins and there are foolish virgins.

Those outside the church do not wait for the Bridegroom. They do not gather in His House to meet Him, nor do they look for His coming in the clouds on the Last Day. Our text does not discuss these people at all. It talks about those who do gather together to meet the Bridegroom; who are the baptized; who call themselves Christians. And of those, some are wise and some are foolish.

But all ten had good intentions. They intended to wait for the coming of the Bridegroom. Even the five foolish virgins had lamps with oil in them. They had faith. That’s what the lamp represents. It’s the lamp of faith. “Let your light shine before men,” says Jesus. These five were doing works of faith. They were coming to worship. They were singing songs of praise to the Bridegroom. At one point in time, there was no way you could tell a difference between the five wise virgins and the five foolish virgins. By how they looked, by what they said...there was no difference. In fact, it’s possible that some of the foolish virgins had nicer lamps than the wise virgins. For a while, their lamps may have put out a better flame. It’s possible.

Then why does Jesus call these five, foolish, and the other five, wise? Well, there is one difference between them. Just one difference. Not a great big difference, just one small difference. But sometimes the small differences are pretty important. When you’re locked out of your house, that little key is pretty important. When the football game is tied with two minutes to play, it makes a difference which team has the ball.

With these ten virgins, the difference was in the little flask of oil. Lamps need oil to burn. Lamps are very much like faith. Both will die out unless more fuel is added. Lamps need oil...faith needs God’s Word and Sacraments. The five foolish virgins were just like the five wise virgins except for one thing—they did not bother to take along any extra oil for their lamps. So when the Bridegroom came, they were not ready. Their lamps had gone

out. And they were locked out of the wedding banquet. That little difference of not having any extra oil cost them everything.

Why don't we bring this story home. We are the ten virgins. We're not outside the church—we belong to the visible church on earth. Our names are written on the church rolls. We come to God's House to meet the Bridegroom. We expect Him to come again in the clouds of judgment. Our lamps of faith are shining. Others can see that we are the bridal party of Christ. We are the ten virgins.

Some of your lamps are burning brighter right now than others are. You're working harder for the church. You're letting your faith shine by your singing, your involvement, your witnessing, your tithing—and that's commendable. But as with the ten virgins, let's pay close attention to the one significant difference between the five wise and the five foolish: the oil of God's Word and Sacraments. That's the fuel that fires our lamps of faith. That's the fuel that will keep our lamp burning, not just now, but also when the Bridegroom comes in glory.

While they were waiting together, the five wise virgins would not have said to the five foolish virgins, "Why aren't your lamps burning?" They were burning. They were all burning while they were waiting. Just like your lamps—they're all burning. Otherwise you would not be here this morning. You'd never come here to meet the Bridegroom. But you belong to the bridal party. You're one of the ten virgins. You have a lamp of faith and it's shining. And it's by the grace of God that your lamp is burning. God gave you your lamp in Holy Baptism. It's His Word and Sacraments that keep fueling your lamp to keep it burning. Were it not for Him we wouldn't care about the coming of the Bridegroom; we wouldn't wait to meet Him.

Now at this point in the sermon you're probably expecting me to say something like this: Some of you are like the five wise virgins and others of you are like the five foolish virgins. And after that you'd expect me to encourage you all to be more like the five wise virgins so that you don't get locked out of heaven when the Bridegroom comes...and then say, "Amen," and sit down.

And I suppose that I could—but it's not quite that simple. Because as I look around this room all I see are wise virgins. I don't see any foolish virgins. All I see are wise virgins. Perhaps some of us have been foolish virgins in the past. But not today. Today you're wise virgins. Because you are here to refuel your lamps. God's Word and His Sacraments are the fuel your lamp needs, and you are wise for being here today. This is not to say that you will all be wise virgins next week, or next month, or next year. But today you are wise virgins. Foolish virgins do not continue to stock up on fuel for their lamps. Wise virgins do.

You know what strikes me about those foolish virgins in our text? They weren't your typical cheats or swindlers or adulterers or hardened criminals—they were church people; virgins waiting for the Bridegroom. But they were locked out of heaven's door for one simple reason—when the Bridegroom came their faith had gone out, because they neglected to refuel their lamps. How can we avoid their fate? Today we are wise, how can we avoid being foolish tomorrow?

You know how? It's the work of God within us. We're not wise by our own efforts. It is God who makes us "wise unto salvation" in Christ Jesus. Your love for the Word of God; your desire for His body and blood; your hunger for His forgiveness is not of your own making—it is the Lord's doing. It is God who baptized you; who brought you from death to life; who forgave all your sins and called you His child. He gave you your lamp of faith through those waters as He did again today with little Loren Elizabeth. It's God who teaches you about His love for you in Jesus through the mouths of your Christian parents, teachers, and pastors. It is God who leads you to His Holy Supper where He gives His meal of grace to you—the body and blood of your Savior.

If you have lived more like a foolish virgin than a wise one, God forgives you. Jesus died for your spiritual laziness. And as He forgives you, He works upon your heart to make you wise in Christ Jesus. And He will never stop doing this. God will never give up on you. No matter how spiritually lazy you are, as often as you come here He keeps forgiving you and working within you so that you can look forward with joy to the coming of the Bridegroom. For you know, dear forgiven child of God, that He comes for you. Amen.