

## Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost – November 8, 2020

### Introduction

**After the Festival of All Saints, the appointed texts of the lectionary turn to the end of the world and the Great Judgment.** For this Sunday, we focus on Jesus' Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens as recorded by St. Matthew. In the parable, the Bridegroom [Christ] is delayed and the ten maidens waited outside to greet him when he arrives. Five had extra oil for their lamps as they waited and five brought no extra oil so their lamps went out. The latter decided to go out and buy more oil. But in their absence the Bridegroom came and the celebration began without them.

**I believe this is a parable about preparedness and how we wait for our Lord's return.** Consider for a moment, the five wise maidens. One might well ask, 'Weren't they accepted because they were prepared?' I think that this is a proper question; but the answer is 'No.' The oil in their lamps had nothing to do with them being allowed into the wedding feast. As a matter of fact, the so-called 'wise' maidens are no prizes either. If they were really serious about their faith, they would have shared their oil with their less prepared sisters. But such was not the case. Perhaps that's one of the points of this parable: *even those who are allowed into the wedding feast are not very good people.* They are allowed in despite their brokenness. And if that's the case, there is hope for all of us.

**So what does this have to do with us? It is very simple: 'working hard enough' has nothing whatsoever to do with our salvation.** On our own, salvation is an impossibility. God has been down this road many times before. God demands everything, but expects nothing. And because we are sinners, we humans fail every time. But the good news is that God is not put off by our brokenness. Although we are guilty, our God acts on a presumption of innocence.

**The parable makes another point: Everyone is already at the wedding feast.** We don't need oil to get in. The foolish maidens walked out looking for something else. They did not have faith in the bridegroom because they thought that he would not accept them because of their lack of oil. They didn't take him at his word when he said that everything was okay. The foolish maidens are judged for their lack of faith; nothing more. It is important to remember that we are all invited to the Great Wedding Feast. The Bridegroom isn't here right now, **but he is coming.** So, above all else, we shouldn't disappoint the Bridegroom by leaving. Jesus really wants to see us.

**In Christ ✝,**

**Pastor Steve**

### ***Personal Pastoral Note***

***[Email sent to Jerry Lochner and Brian Lindgren on October 30, 2020 after a personal phone call to each.]***

To: Brian Lindgren, President of Immanuel Lutheran Church

Jerry Lochner, President of Bethel Lutheran Church

Dear Brian and Jerry,

After much prayerful consideration, I believe that my time serving as your intentional interim pastor is nearing an end. Thanks to your leadership, the Bethel-Immanuel Lutheran Parish has made significant progress as we faced some difficult issues. You have empowered your respective church councils to seriously look at your future. Together, we have generated a strong Ministry Site Profile that I believe accurately reflects this parish's commitment to our Lord's ministry in the future.

Both churches have been receptive to my ministry and have been extremely gracious in accommodating my needs. For this I am extremely grateful. My decision reflects a number of considerations: the continuing Covid-19 pandemic and its implications for my health as well as that of our parishioners; the distance from my home to each of the churches, especially when doing a 'there and back' for each worship experience; and finally, my transfer to the St. Paul Area Synod for rostering and possible assignments closer to my home. I am also sensing a personal need for change as I enter further into my retirement.

As written in my interim contract with the parish, a thirty-day notice is required by either the pastor or the parish to end our relationship. Please consider this as that notice. My understanding is that I will continue to be paid as agreed to in our contract through the end of November. This includes both salary and benefits with Portico. As I indicated earlier, I will continue to write weekly meditations while on vacation for distribution as I have done since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis.

If you wish, I am willing to continue writing weekly devotionals [and a Christmas devotional] and overseeing the call process until the end of December should both church councils wish me to do so. Compensation for this can be negotiated. For practical reasons, I am not interested in doing outdoor worship services because of the December temperatures or indoor services because of the pandemic.

I will send a copy of this email to Deacon Brenda Tibbetts at the NE MN Synod Office. She will assist you in procuring an interim pastor and/or pulpit supply when you begin in-person worship. I will also speak with Eleanor Starr about the details in closing out our financial agreement as of November 30, 2020.

May God bless you in your continuing work.

In Christ,  
Pastor Stephen Olson

***Scripture Lesson – 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18***

<sup>13</sup>But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. <sup>14</sup>For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. <sup>15</sup>For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. <sup>16</sup>For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup>Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. <sup>18</sup>Therefore encourage one another with these words.

***Gospel – Matthew 25.1-13***

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup>Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup>When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; <sup>4</sup>but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. <sup>5</sup>As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. <sup>6</sup>But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' <sup>7</sup>Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup>The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' <sup>9</sup>But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' <sup>10</sup>And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. <sup>11</sup>Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' <sup>12</sup>But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' <sup>13</sup>Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

***“Where is he? . . . You’d think he’d be on time!”***

**Let us pray.** Almighty and everlasting God, we thank you for the gift of our baptism which seals us with the Holy Spirit and marks us with the cross of Christ forever. We are new creations called by your Holy Spirit to lives of faith, service, and daily repentance. But since we are still strangers and pilgrims on earth, help us to prepare for the world to come, doing the work you have given us while it is day before the night comes when no one can work. And when our last hour shall come, support us by your power and receive us into your everlasting Kingdom, where, with your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and the Holy Spirit, you live and reign, God forever. Amen.

**Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**Family rituals are important.** One of the Olson family rituals is to watch certain television specials together. At Christmas time, we always watch ‘A Christmas Story’ written by Jean Shepherd. Nine-year-old Ralphie wants a Red Rider BB-gun; but his mother is concerned that he will ‘shoot his eye out.’ Prior to Halloween, our daughters insist that we watch Walt Disney’s ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ –The animated story of Ichabod Crane and the Headless Horseman.

**Our Halloween ritual also includes ‘It’s the Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown.’** It is a pleasant little story about expectations. Lucy’s little brother, Linus, believes the legend of the Great Pumpkin. On Halloween night, the *Great Pumpkin* rises up out of a pumpkin patch and flies through the air bringing toys to all the children of the world. Linus believes that if you are in a ‘*sincere pumpkin patch,*’ you will actually see the Great Pumpkin. Every Halloween Linus forgoes *trick or treating* to wait in the pumpkin patch for the coming of the Great Pumpkin. And every year he goes home disappointed — The Great Pumpkin never comes.

**‘However,’ Linus thought, ‘This year will be different . . . This is the year that the Great Pumpkin will come . . . The Great Pumpkin will come and no one will laugh at me again.’** Even Lucy calling him a ‘blockhead’ and telling him that he will be sorry for missing trick or treating didn’t bother him. ‘This is the year,’ Linus said, ‘I can feel it.’ He was so certain that he even convinced Charlie Brown’s little sister Sally to wait with him in the pumpkin patch.

**You can guess what happened.** Once again, the Great Pumpkin did not come. Now, Lucy is certain that Linus is a blockhead, and little Sally is disappointed. When it became obvious that nothing was going to happen in the pumpkin patch, Sally screamed at Linus, ‘*I was robbed. I spent all night waiting for the Great Pumpkin when I could have*

been out trick or treating. Now Halloween is over, and I missed it. You kept me up all night looking for the Great Pumpkin and I got was a beagle . . . You owe me restitution!’

**The Great Pumpkin is a silly story, but in a way, life is a bit like that for Christians who are waiting for Jesus to return.** The Second Coming of Jesus has always been problematic for Christians. Watching and waiting are difficult. We watch for signs of change. We wait for the Resurrected Christ to come again in glory to establish his Kingdom. This is part and parcel to the Christian faith. Every time we confess our faith in Jesus using the words of the Apostles’ Creed, we say, ‘He will come again to judge the living and the dead.’ Sunday after Sunday, we say these familiar words; the same words Christians have been saying for nearly two thousand years. Generation after generation has asked: **‘Where is Jesus anyway? You’d think he’d be on time!’ But still, he has not come.**

**When you stop and think about it, these are valid questions . . . Unwanted questions force themselves upon us.** ‘Do we mean what we say? Do we really want to meet Jesus as the judge of the living and the dead? Do we truly want his Kingdom to come right now?’ And most important, ‘How should we live in the shadow of eternity? What should we be doing with our time?’ Then, to make matters more difficult, there’s the matter of timing. On the one hand, there are those who pray that the Day of the Lord might come soon because they suffer and seek release. On the other hand, there are those who hope that Jesus comes sometime, but not right now because life is going pretty well . . . So what’s the rush? After all, heaven’s an unknown quantity. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. These folk are simply too busy enjoying themselves now and who knows what heaven will be like?

**What makes this all so difficult is that Christians have been waiting for a long time.** The early Christian community expected the return of Jesus almost immediately. They expected to see him return before any of them died. *But Jesus did not return. ‘Perhaps,’ they thought, ‘perhaps, he’s changed his mind . . . Perhaps, Jesus isn’t coming back at all. Or, perhaps, he’s just late. But if that’s true, what happens to us if we die before he comes back?’*

**In his letters to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul gives voice to the uncertainty that troubled nearly all first generation Christians.** But he is quick to remind early believers that **‘salvation is nearer than when we first believed’** . . . And that Jesus will come again, either in their lifetimes, or in someone else’s. For Paul, the question is not ‘When?’ but ‘Who?’ This is important: Jesus must be the center of the discussion. Christians are baptized into Jesus. So dead or alive, they are secure in Jesus because he tasted death

and was resurrected by the power of God. And since death could not hold Jesus, it cannot hold anyone who believes in him.

***But the more important question is not ‘When will it happen?’ but rather, ‘How are Christians to wait?’*** This morning, the Lord Jesus answers with ‘The Parable of the Ten Maidens.’ It was the last week of our Lord’s life. In one of the few private moments with his disciples, Jesus began to tell them plainly about the coming *day of the Lord* [or day of judgment]. He speaks of persecution, preparation for the end, and God’s standard for the judgment of his people. The parable of the wise and foolish maidens is part of this teaching and is meant for all disciples both past and present.

***The parable is quite simple.*** Ten bridesmaids await the coming of the bridegroom so that the wedding celebration might begin. We are told that five were wise because they brought extra oil for their lamps; the others who did not, were *foolish*. When the bridegroom was delayed late into the night, they all slept.

***Suddenly, the bridesmaids were awakened with the shout, ‘Here comes the bridegroom. Come out to meet him!’*** As was the custom of the day, all ten bridesmaids trimmed their lamps; but only the wise who had extra oil were able to light them. When the five foolish maidens asked them for oil, the wise refused, and went out to meet the bridegroom. The others went out into the town to purchase the oil they needed. When the foolish maidens finally got their lamps lit, they sought the bridegroom; but he had already entered the wedding feast. When they came to the feast saying, ***‘Lord, Lord, open to us,’*** the bridegroom replied, ***‘Truly, I tell you, I do not know you.’*** And then Jesus adds, ***‘KEEP AWAKE THEREFORE, FOR YOU KNOW NEITHER THE DAY NOR THE HOUR.’***

***Our Lord’s parables are designed to involve the hearer in the story and to force a decision about what has been heard.*** The Parable of the Ten Maidens is about preparing for the end times. The coming of the bridegroom to the wedding feast most certainly refers to the glorious return of the resurrected Jesus on the *Day of the Lord*. The maidens are those who, like us, wait for the return of the Master.

***But now, things become more difficult.*** I think it’s helpful to begin with what the parable is not. It is not about being locked out of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is not about hoarding oil at the expense of others. This parable is not about looking after Number One while others lose out. When we hear this parable, we automatically count ourselves among the ‘wise’ maidens who are prepared and speak ill of the ‘foolish’ who have no oil for their lamps. But I don’t think that this is what Jesus had in mind.

**Two things are striking. First, both the wise and the foolish are invited to the wedding.** You might say that all ten are professing Christians who full well plan to meet their Lord. There are no distinctions. Invitations are not handed out on the basis of being wise or foolish, good or bad, moral or immoral, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, male or female, young or old, or even Republican or Democrat. At the **Great Wedding Feast for the Son**, all people are invited to take part in the festivities when God makes all things new. God insists that everyone have an invitation; and, one way or another, that will happen.

**Second, what sets the 'wise' apart from the 'foolish' is that they bring extra oil for their lamps.** They were prepared for the coming of the Bridegroom to the Wedding Banquet. They lit their lamps with their oil and welcomed him. Instead of using the words 'wise' and 'foolish' I prefer, 'thoughtful' and 'thoughtless.' The thoughtful maidens are prepared. The thoughtless, on the other hand, assume that nothing more is required of them. They are surprised every morning when the sun comes up.

**The parable, I think, talks about the nature of faith.** Judgment will be upon the basis of faith. When salvation by faith alone is preached, we have a feeling that this is much too easy. But in this parable, we discover that faith is not just simply saying, 'I believe in Jesus;' but rather, faith is living in a trusting, and sometimes dangerous, relationship with him. Dangerous because our relationship with Jesus might well lead us where we would rather not go. The point of the parable is that God will judge us all on *faith in action*; not *faith with folded hands*.

**The five foolish maidens were unprepared for the coming of the bridegroom.** Their lack of preparation is obvious because they had no extra oil for their lamps. Note that there is no word of condemnation for them. They were lost, not because they were wicked, but because they were thoughtless and took no heed of the coming judgment. They were good people who simply forgot to buy oil for their lamps. Jesus is speaking to all Christians who live their lives without taking into account the reality of God's judgment. According to Jesus, such ignorance can be disastrous.

**What then, does a life of faith look like?** How does one live, not only for today, but also for all the tomorrows that will come? . . . Tomorrows that may end with either our death, or when Jesus does come again? How does one prepare for the Day of the Lord?

**The answer, I think, is quite simple.** Matthew suggests that to be prepared is to be part of the community of faith. To be prepared is to acknowledge Jesus as both Lord and Teacher of this community. To be prepared is love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. To

be prepared, is not to offer burnt offerings, to hold solemn assemblies, or to sing sacred songs; but to take up the ministry of our Lord wherever that might lead us. This might mean giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the strangers among us, clothing to the naked, and even giving welcome to the strangers among us. In short, to be prepared is to be ‘little Christs’ to those around us.

***But do not despair at the difficulty of the task.*** Jesus does not leave us to accomplish the impossible. Jesus assures those who follow him that ‘. . . **WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED IN MY NAME, THERE AM I IN THE MIDST OF THEM.**’ We are not alone; The Spirit of the Resurrected Jesus is with us. And because he is present, it is possible for us to love our enemies, to forgive those who sin against us, to comfort the grieving, and to befriend the lonely.

***As far as I know, the Great Pumpkin did not come last week on Halloween.*** Nonetheless, Linus will be out there again next year. And as far as I know, the Bridegroom has been delayed. We at the Wedding Feast are still waiting. Perhaps his tardiness is a blessing. There is still time get our oil and live our faith. But rest assured, Jesus will come in his own good time. He is the Bridegroom and there can’t be a party without him. ***So sleep if you must, but don’t forget the oil.*** Amen.