Matthew 25:1-13 – You Know Neither the Day Nor the Hour – Pentecost 24 – November 8, 2026
+In Nomine Iesu+

So, what about the oil? That's the question, right? And no, I am not talking about gas prices, or the Straight of Hormuz, or the election—thankfully. I am talking about the Gospel reading—the Parable of the Ten Virgins.

Jesus tells us, "Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps." And so, the question for us today is: what is the oil in this parable? Our Gospel reading comes from Matthew 25. And—you're going to like this one—Matthew 25 comes after Matthew 24.

I know. It's a brilliant insight. But it is kind of a shame we didn't read all of chapter 24 before coming to chapter 25. The lectionary just has too many gaps. I will have to leave that in your capable hands today. But let me include just a few verses.

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

And so, as we enter Jesus' Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25, we continue in Jesus' Great Eschatological Discourse. He is in Jerusalem. It's Holy Week. And He warns them about the Day of the Lord. Remember that *eschatology* is the study of last things. And, of course, we want to look to Jesus for such things—with a little help from Amos and St. Paul today. YouTube, Google, and the latest fanatical predictions and conspiracy theories from TBN won't help us much.

Central to our eschatology is the return of Christ. And I always think it is good to remind us of the basics here. Lutherans are Amillennial. That just means we believe in one return of Christ at the end. We don't believe in a secret rapture of the Church. We don't think current events in the news about the Middle East are signs of His return in our time necessarily. The signs we are given—false teachers, wars, famines, earthquakes, apathy, apostasy—mark the entire Church age.

The Church lives in the last days now—but also for the last two thousand years. We live in the tribulation—even as we also live in the millennial age. And our great hope is the return of Christ. His return signals the resurrection and the new creation—the judgment and the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Jesus will return and set all things right. And we confess it every week. "And He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end…And I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

This parable—most fundamentally—teaches us to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man—especially since we do not know the timing. We should be prepared, expectant—even excited for His return. Jesus concludes this parable by saying, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

So, we don't believe the predictions of those who think they have cracked the code. The Bible isn't full of clues for figuring out the timing of His return—as if we just need the right algorithm. Remember what Jesus says in chapter 24, "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." So, unless you are God the Father—and you are not—you don't know the date for the return of Christ. And we can safely ignore any and all predictions.

But with all of the millennial madness out there in the world, sometimes it is easy to neglect the more central message of this parable. We can get so jaded by all of the strange and foolish ideas that we forget to do the one thing that Jesus tells us to do. We are to be ready for His return. We are to look for His return, "Watch therefore."

And Jesus communicates this truth with His Parable of the Ten Virgins. And in this parable, five were ready. Five were not. Five were wise. Five were foolish. Five were watchful. Five were not. And we want to find ourselves among the ready and the wise and the watchful. Let's talk about what this means.

Now, just to be clear, Jesus is the Bridegroom in this parable. The wedding feast signals the beginning of eternity for His people. And the ten virgins symbolize those who claim that Jesus Christ is Lord—the Church. This is important, by the way. The Ten Virgins represent the community of those who claim Christianity. They are part of a local Church—or they claim the name, *Christian*.

But there is a problem. There is a division among them. And this is a frequent refrain in Matthew's Gospel. Among the visible followers of Christ, not all will be found to be true disciples when Christ returns. And this tells us that the life of a disciple is marked by spiritual danger. Disciples can drift into unbelief, heresy, secularism, apathy, distraction, and compromise. A mere spiritual veneer over an otherwise godless worldview simply won't do.

And so, Jesus warns His followers to remain vigilant against the possibility of falling away—the possibility of not being ready—when He returns in glory. We need to meet that day aright. The hard part is the oil. What is the oil in the parable? What keeps us prepared? This seems to be the difference between the two groups of virgins. One group had enough. One group ran out. One group was wisely prepared. One group was foolishly unprepared.

It is interesting. Both groups fell asleep waiting for the bridegroom. Elsewhere, sleep can be a synonym for spiritual apathy or even apostasy. Even just back in chapter 24, Jesus says, "Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

From this, we learn that the meaning of images from parable to parable can change. We need to let this one stand on its own. And so sleep in our parable probably just means that Jesus' return will take a while. Rest—the ordinary human kind—is not the problem. It's okay to sleep at night. Get in your eight hours. Practice sabbath rest—it's good for you—all the while being prepared.

It is the lack of oil that is the problem in this parable. And trying to interpret the oil in this passage is difficult. The nearest parallel passage is probably in Matthew 5, from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus uses some of the same language. He says, "Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

So, what is the oil? It appears to be something that cannot be shared between us. We cannot credit the oil to one another. Each virgin stands on her own. There is no hint from Jesus that the wise virgins were being stingy or selfish by not sharing. It was more about personal preparedness. Either you are ready or you are not. But what makes one prepared for something as important as the return of Christ?

Many will say the preparedness is faith. This was even Luther's view. I read one of his sermons this week. It was quite good. And it is likely part of the answer. But I think there is something more to it. In fact, I think Jesus is even intentionally vague. He is getting at a more general understanding of being ready for the return of Christ.

And so, the oil in the parable represents whatever it takes for us to be ready to honor the Bridegroom—to glorify Christ—when He comes again in glory. It is attention to spiritual things—eternal things. Here, Jesus pushes back against whatever in our lives that we reserve for ourselves—that one area of sin or selfishness—to which we cling.

This means that, depending on our own situations and spiritual needs—the oil may stand for faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. It may be something like the fear of the Lord. It may be our knowledge and reception of Christian truths. It may mean a willingness to repent of our sincere—but unbiblical—moral or political ideals. It may mean our willingness to give ourselves fully over to the Lordship of Christ—in our personal finances, in our Sunday habits, in the daily rhythms of life.

It is the courage and perseverance to stick with Christ—even when Christianity is no longer popular. It is putting ourselves in a place to receive His gifts—of knowing where He has promised to be. It is welcoming His gifts of sanctification—seeing ourselves as set apart for His purposes in the world. It is to be people of prayer—real prayer with real words—putting His Word on our tongues. It is a sorrowful awareness of the world's brokenness—and a longing for God's name to be hallowed among us—and in the world. It is setting aside our need for constant attention and affirmation—and resting confidently in Christ who meets all of our needs. The religious questions mark the deepest level of human needs.

And my list could just keep going. The oil in our lamps is whatever it takes to receive and honor the King when He comes. It is seeing all of life in relation to His soon return. And this parable teaches us to desire such things—eternal things. Jesus says, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

And so my question for you today is, are you ready? The ten virgins were to be prepared to welcome and honor the Bridegroom at His coming. This was their highest good—the one thing they really anticipated. And five were ready. Their eyes were set on Jesus. And this is our great hope as well. This is our focus—our purpose. It is our highest priority—the soon return of Christ. Eternal life. A realized eschatology. It is as Paul says in Philippians 3, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

No, we can't predict the timing. And we can safely ignore all of the crazy predictions and the conspiracy theories. These are just distractions away from what actually matters.

But we should long for the return of Christ as our highest good. We should think about it all the time. He will set all things right.

It is as we hear from the angel of the Lord in Revelation 19, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”And let me finish with Luke’s version of what we heard earlier from Matthew 24. It gets at the force of what Jesus is saying throughout His Eschatological Discourse. “And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+