

## INI

Matthew 25,1-13

Last Sunday of the Church Year — 20 November 2016

**Greeting:** To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew, which was read earlier:

[Jesus concludes His parable and saysto His disciples and us:] “Be on the alert then, for you do not know that day or the hour.”

**So far the reading. Let us pray:** Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

**Introduction:** Years ago there was a commercial on television about such things as oil filters and air filters for cars. There was a picture of a fellow holding an oil filter, and then a voice saying, “You can pay me a little now,” and then there was a picture of a car with smoke bellowing from the engine and the same voice voice saying, “Or you can pay me a lot later.”

It’s obvious that if an auto does not have gas it will not run. But less obviously, if the auto does not have enough oil, does not have its oil filter or air filter changed regularly, and so forth, it will not only not run properly, but will actually break down and cause big repair bills later.

The point of the commercial was that proper preventive maintenance pays for itself. It doesn’t pay for itself immediately, but it pays for itself in the long run. It only makes sense that if you or I invest 15 or 20 thousand dollars in a car or truck — and believe me, it’s easy to spend a lot more than that —, you want to keep it in running order so that we don’t wake up one day and find that instead of having a properly

running vehicle we now have something that either doesn't work or we have an expensive piece of scrap metal on our hands.

Nobody wants to wake up to nasty, expensive surprises. The key is preventive maintenance. And that's the point Jesus is trying to make in the parable of the ten virgins. The key to living with Jesus both now and forever is "**Proper Preventive Spiritual Maintenance**", which is also the theme for today's sermon. I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Waiting and Wondering;**
- 2) Drowsiness and Sleep; and,**
- 3) Wake Up Time!**

**1) Waiting and Wondering.** The scene for this parable is a wedding feast, probably set in one of the small Palestinian towns with which the disciples were familiar—none of them were big city boys. And while we do not know all the details of such weddings, we know that there were processions for both the bride and the groom. In this case the bride was in her house and the bridesmaids were going out with their lamps to wait for the groom to get his bride. The bridesmaids were going out with joy and anticipation.

They would lead the couple into the wedding hall and then the festivities could begin.

Now Jesus clearly says that this waiting, this assembling of the ten virgins with their lamps ready to greet the groom, this preparation for a triumphal procession into the wedding feast, is like the Kingdom of Heaven. And because it is a parable of the Kingdom of Heaven, we can say that the groom is Jesus Himself. In Hosea, God speaks of Himself being the bridegroom of His people:

And I will betroth you to Me forever;  
Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice.  
In steadfast love and in compassion.  
And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness.

Then you will know that I am the LORD. (Hosea 2,19-20)

In both the Old and the New Testament, God's people, or, the Church, is the Bride of the Lord. In the ninth chapter of Matthew we read that as Jesus spoke to the disciples of John the Baptist, Jesus explicitly called Himself "the Bridegroom" (Matthew 9,14-15).

The wedding feast is when the groom will come at the end of time and all those who have been invited and are prepared will be welcome.

Those ten virgins represent the Church, which, throughout the ages, has been brought into being when Jesus said, "Follow Me." As the risen Lord He calls through Word and Sacrament. This was a command which He gave to His first disciples:

Go therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28,19-20)

This was both a Word of command and a Word of promise, and the promise is that through Word and Sacrament Jesus is with His disciples until the "end of the age."

Yes. He has also called us, and even today promises that He is with us through Word and Sacrament.

The ten virgins are waiting with their lamps.

These lamps can either be small oil lamps or torches, around whose tops are wrapped rags which, when soaked in oil, will burn and give off a bright light. Both of them would need oil in order to burn.

The light which will be given off probably stands for those good works which are a result of a living faith in Jesus as Savior. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks to His disciples and says:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.  
(Matthew 5,14-16)

Therefore the oil stands for a living faith which through Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of believers, then as well as now.

So the virgins wait for the Bridegroom and wonder when He will be coming. But as they wait and wonder, they become overcome by

**2) Drowsiness and Sleep.** Now the ten virgins are probably waiting by the house of the bride for the Bridegroom to come.

At the time of Jesus, and perhaps even today in the Middle East, punctuality as we know it was and is not very necessary.

It was certain that the Bridegroom was coming, but no one knew exactly when during the night He was going to arrive, and that was the expected way things went. It is night, and perhaps the bridesmaids have been up all day, and now they have to wait a bit longer. They get drowsy, and then they lie down and fall asleep — literally falling asleep on their feet. This is all understandable, and Jesus Himself does not really say this behavior is in any way sinful or blame worthy.

But what does it mean “to fall asleep?” Perhaps falling asleep refers to the rhythm of our lives. Nothing unusual about falling asleep. Waking and sleeping is the rhythm of life, and all ten of the virgins fall asleep.

Now many in the early Church thought that Jesus was going to return quite soon, and it seems that the point some of these parables were meant to tell the church that if this did not meet their human

expectations, do not loose heart. Keep waiting. You can depend on Jesus' promise!

I am reminded of the deep faith of small children. For most, young children have no difficulty believing. One has only to remember Sunday School classes of young children, with their faces full of wonder and belief as their faith grows as they hear the story of salvation. Hearing of the birth of Jesus, born of the Virgin mild. Of His life. Of His holy and innocent suffering and death, a death not only for their sins, but for the sins of the world. Of His glorious resurrection. His ascension into heaven, and also His promise to return. But in the meantime, His promise is to be with them until the end of the age. And they have absolutely no trouble believing that Jesus is with them.

But somewhere along the way something happens. By confirmation many of those children still believe, but belief has become a chore, and class itself is something to be endured. Some of the joy has been tarnished. I have used this example before, but I am reminded of a story that I heard of a rural church that was heated by a wood stove; after confirmation the tradition was that the children would throw their catechisms into the fire. It was like graduation and the message was, "I'm done; I've got enough to last me the rest of my life!"

Before the bridesmaids fell asleep, however, they were supposed to be ready to meet the Bridegroom. That means, they all should have enough oil to keep their lamps or torches lit and burning.

Now in the parable, before they even fell asleep, five of the virgins were wise and had taken extra oil for their lamps but five were foolish, and had taken no extra oil. But all had been invited and all had fallen asleep. What can we say about them?

The wise had a living faith before they fell asleep. For them, for example, confirmation was not the end but a beginning or a continuation of growing in faith. During their lives they heard God's saving Word and through Word and Sacrament their faith was nourished. They did

not despise preaching or hearing God's Word. They struggled with the difficulties of everyday life, and they always sought out the help of the living God, Jesus Himself. They had the assurance that Jesus forgave their sins and that He would be with them "until the end of the age."

And what of the foolish? It is sad to say that they fell asleep and sometime during their lifetimes their faith had died. Perhaps they only had a head knowledge of Jesus and not a heart knowledge. As Paul says, "they have the form of godliness, but they deny its power" (2 Timothy 3,5).

Of both, our Lutheran Confessions say the following:

Although hypocrites and wicked men are members of this true Church according to outward rites [titles and offices], yet when the church is defined, it is necessary to define that which is the living Body of Christ, and which is in name and fact the Church [which is called the Body of Christ, and has fellowship not alone in outward signs, but has gifts in the heart, namely, the Holy Spirit and faith].... Therefore only those are the people, according to the Gospel, who receive this promise of the Spirit. Besides, the Church is the Kingdom of Christ, distinguished from the kingdom of the devil. The godless, who are in Satan's kingdom, cannot be the Church, although in this life, since the Kingdom of Christ has not been revealed, they are mingled with true Christians in the Church, ... Then Jesus clearly says that the true Church will be separate from the Israel which is according to the flesh. Christ also speaks of the outward appearance of the Church when He says, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net"; likewise, "to ten virgins." And He teaches that the Church has been covered by a multitude of evils, in order that this stumbling block may not offend the pious. [*Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, Art. 7 & 8, "Of the Church," 171.19]

Now back to the wedding party because it is

**3) Wake Up Time!** All of a sudden there is a cry, "the

bridegroom is coming!” It’s quite literally “Wake up time!”

All of a sudden, the virgins realized that while they were asleep their lamps had burned down. They had to trim the wick and then pour oil on the lamps for the procession. But five of the virgins were unprepared; they had not brought extra oil, they would not be ready for the procession into the wedding hall. They were not prepared, and the five who were prepared had enough for themselves but not enough to share and still have enough for themselves.

The tragedy of this parable is not that the five unprepared bridesmaids were wicked, the tragedy is that they were unprepared, they were foolish, in a word, although it isn’t fashionable to use, they were stupid. Perhaps even worse than stupid. The Greek word for “foolish” is the word from which we get the word “moron.”

For us here this morning we have a cautionary tale.

Jesus warns all believers that in this life we should be prepared and watchful! It is certain that we know neither the day or hour of Jesus’ return. It is also certain that we know neither the day or hour when we shall die.

To God, Jesus paid for all of our sins when he died on the Cross. Whoever does not believe that must at death pay the price for all his or her sins and since he cannot he is handed over to the devil for eternal punishment. That’s a terrible price to pay!

In this life we have to pay for preventive maintenance — whether for an auto, a house, electronic devices, whatever.

For a correct spiritual maintenance program, however, Jesus has paid for everything.

How can we begin such a spiritual preventive maintenance program? Perhaps we do no better than to read Luther’s explanation of

## the Third Commandment:

We should fear and love God so that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

(Luther, *Small Catechism*, "Explanation of the Third Commandment")

Through the saving Word of God, the Holy Spirit nourishes our faith. Daily we should repent of our sins and daily we should hear God's Word of promise that He forgives us for Jesus' sake. Then, as a forgiven and renewed person, we are able to stand before God and are able to serve Him and our neighbor in the love of Christ.

**Conclusion.** Beloved, it is never too late to begin a spiritual preventive maintenance program. It doesn't cost us a thing, but it cost Jesus everything. He promises that He will be with us until the end of the age. He has sent us the Holy Spirit who, through the Word and Sacrament, gives us the spiritual nourishment that we need, so that our "oil" tank will never be empty. As Paul says:

Behold, now is the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians 6,2) Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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