Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost - A Proper 27 (2026)

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Psalm 78: 1-7
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

‘“Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”’ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In other words, BE PREPARED! BE ALERT! BE WATCHFUL! BE VIGILANT! BE READY! BE BUSY!

The African American spiritual puts it this way:

‘Keep your lamps trimmed and burning,
Keep your lamps trimmed and burning,
Keep your lamps trimmed and burning,
The time is drawing nigh’

The time is drawing nigh, indeed. That was the feeling and expectation of Matthew's fellow first-century believers. The believing community anxiously awaited Jesus' return. They anticipated his glorious return to usher in peace and prosperity and make all things ‘right.’

Today’s Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids is another example of Jesus’ allegorical teaching. This parable belongs to the section of Matthew’s Gospel that deals with the end times and the Second Coming of Christ. Matthew’s church was dealing with the unexpected delay in Jesus’ return, as many expected it to happen during their lifetime. Jesus uses today’s parable, along with the Parable of the Talents and the Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants, to teach and remind his followers that one must be ready, alert, and prepared for his return, busy with the work of the pending kingdom of heaven, not knowing when that time will come.

At the beginning of chapter 24, Jesus speaks of the destruction of the Temple, and his disciples say, “There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” The disciples subsequently ask Jesus three questions, all relating to the end of time: “When will these things be?” “What is the sign of your coming?”, and “What is the sign of the end of the age?” Jesus answered that they should “see to it that no one leads you astray” by the efforts of false prophets; they will hear of wars and rumors of war among nations, of famines and earthquakes, of general lawlessness, and of the love of many growing cold. All of these rumors and calamities must take place before the end times come. “These,” Jesus tells the disciples, “Are but the beginning of the birth pains.”

However, Jesus did tell them about the sign for when the end would come: "...(when) the gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” While Jesus offered some clarification regarding what would need to happen prior to his return- the spreading of the gospel message throughout the whole world- he nonetheless made it clear to the disciples that no one but the Father, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, knew the day or the hour of his return. Because the disciples could not know when Jesus’s return would be, they were to remain ‘alert.’ They were to be ‘ready’ for the Son of Man coming at an unexpected hour.

In today’s parable, we see a wedding and the unexpected timing of the bridegroom's arrival. Jesus tells the disciples that “the kingdom of heaven will be like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.” The ones he described as foolish brought no additional oil, probably assuming the bridegroom would arrive at a reasonable hour, and their lamps would still have enough oil. The wise were deemed so because they brought a flask of oil to replenish their lamps if needed, ‘just in case’ the bridegroom's arrival was delayed. *All* these bridesmaids were invited to the wedding festivities, and *all* had oil to begin the wedding procession. *All* fell asleep waiting for the bridegroom to arrive. But *only* the wise were prepared for the unexpected delay of the bridegroom. The wise were prepared whenever the bridegroom arrived. They had ‘planned ahead.’

Midnight comes, when one is normally asleep, and the bridegroom finally arrives. Unexpectedly, the celebration can begin. All the bridesmaids arise and get ready for the festive procession, but the foolish ones have no oil left. They asked their fellow bridesmaids for some, but they declined to help and suggested they buy some from local dealers. While they went to buy more oil, the procession moved toward the marriage celebration and feast, and once everyone arrived, the door was shut. The five bridesmaids who had to go buy more oil returned and expected to be allowed in. But in words I find hard to hear, Jesus tells them, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you."

I mentioned earlier that this parable is another example of Matthew's use of allegory. Here are some key symbols:

- The bridegroom is Christ
- The ten virgins are the church
- The wedding feast is the great occasion when Christ comes for his church
- The delay of the bridegroom is the delay of the Second Coming
- The bridegroom's arrival at midnight is the Second Coming
- The closing of the door is judgment
- The oil is 'being prepared' through faithful works in service to others and obedience to the ways of God in this time of 'now but not yet'
- The lamps are our hearts, minds, and souls

This parable begs several questions for each of us: How are we, as Christians, supposed to live as we wait for Christ's return? Are our lamps filled with enough oil that it will not run out? Are our lamps filled with the oil of good works, worship and praise, compassion, mercy, and righteousness of God's spirit dwelling within us? Are we 'sitting around' waiting for Jesus to return, or are we actively going about doing the work of kingdom building in this time before he returns? Are we doing the will of God in service to others, renewing our souls and replenishing our lamps?

I would be remiss not to point out that the 'shutting of the door' is seen as the final judgment. We don't like to talk about judgment, but to leave it out as a reality, to which only God knows how his punishment will be administered, diminishes the value of the parable. A truth of the parable is that the five foolish bridesmaids

were not allowed entrance into the wedding feast. They weren't ready when the bridegroom arrived. They had not properly prepared themselves for the celebration. The judgment aspect of this parable is sobering. Despite this sobering reality, believers need not fear the return of Christ, for we have been redeemed by the Cross of Christ, his atoning death for our sins. We can focus on the work of the coming kingdom with the assurance that we have been saved. We can take additional hope from this teaching, as it can motivate our urgent action of 'getting prepared' for the festivities on the horizon.

We 'get prepared' as our hearts, minds, and souls seek God's will for our lives, which produces fruit in acts of loving God and our neighbor. We 'get prepared' when we gather for worship, study, and pray; when we serve the needs of others; and when we fellowship with others as a means of offering and receiving encouragement for the troubles that persist in our lives and the world around us. We 'get prepared' as we honestly reflect on our faith journey, knowing that our time on this earthly pilgrimage is but a moment when measured by God's eternal timeline. This reflective work moves us to repent of those words and deeds that are not aligned with the Spirit of God. We 'get prepared' as we seek the righteousness of God and not the self-righteousness of the world.

There is a lot to do to be 'prepared,' but in doing so, our faith grows stronger and our commitment to living as disciples of Christ becomes our 'North Star,' our guiding light and principle. All this work of preparation not only deepens our spiritual life, but it also allows us to live with joy and hope the 'kingdom life' in the here and now.

Christ has died. Christ has risen. ***Christ will come again.*** We celebrate this proclamation of truth during the Eucharist, affirm it in Scripture, and demonstrate it in how we choose to live as followers of Christ. The wedding celebration is coming. It is fast approaching. It *will* happen. Until then, BE PREPARED! BE ALERT! BE WATCHFUL! BE VIGILANT! BE BUSY! BE READY! Keep your lamps trimmed and burning; Keep your lamps trimmed and burning; Keep your lamps trimmed and burning; the time is drawing nigh.