

The Last Sunday of the Church Year  
26 November, Anno Domini 2017  
St. Matthew 25:1-13  
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Why does Jesus warn us over and over again to be watchful? It's almost as though He knows that we are going to struggle to do just that. Many of us are probably still trying to wake up after our turkey and stuffing-induced stupor. We're groggy and a little slow on the uptake. Imagine how difficult it would have been Thursday afternoon, having gorged yourself on countless delicious dishes to then be asked to stay awake all night and keep watch because someone very important was going to be coming. Now, imagine that the consequence of missing that person's arrival was death. Now imagine that you have to stay alert by yourself and there's no coffee.

Impossible. There's no way I could ever do it. I can confidently say to you I would be out like a light and a parade could go by and I would miss it. I'm sure the five foolish virgins thought they were ready, that they would have plenty of oil. These Christians were as eager as the other five. They were baptized. They believed the Gospel and looked forward to Jesus return. What they doubted were the dangers that lay ahead. They believed that they were fine on their own. They had received forgiveness at the first, why should they need more on the way? Jesus' forgiveness is always good.

And that's certainly true. The mercy and the steadfast love of Jesus endure forever. They never change, they never fade. They are never taken away from us. They aren't weak. We are. All Christians are weak. I don't think it's necessarily helpful to think in terms of strong or weak Christians. Really, at the heart of our confession as Christians is that we are weak. There is nothing good within us, within our flesh. That is just full of rot and sin and unbelief and foolishness. To believe otherwise is to call God Himself a liar and to deny the truth that lies so clearly in front of us. If we must speak of strong Christians, then the strongest are those who are most acutely aware that they aren't strong at all. Because only when we acknowledge just how weak and helpless we are, are we driven to cling closely to Him who is infinitely strong to save and protect us in the Last Day - the bridegroom Himself, Jesus Christ.

It is always important to note that it wasn't just the five foolish who fell asleep. All of them did. All of them failed to remain watchful. All of them in some way or another gave up the watch. They gave into the sinful desires of their flesh. They got busy. They got bored. They thought they had watched enough. They got tired of fighting the world and themselves. All were guilty. We may be baptized but the Old Adam remains, always seeking to lull us into the sleep of sin and death. And woe to us if we try to make it through the night of this life alone. It's not starting in faith that saves you. You must finish the race in faith.

But faith can't survive if it is not fed, continually, with the Word that first created it. Let this parable of Christ condemn that devilish teaching of once saved always saved. You can most definitely begin in Christ and end in hell. Certainly not by Christ's choosing. The five wise were only so because they knew they couldn't survive it apart from the gifts of Christ. They knew the wait could be long and they knew their flesh was weak. And though they fell asleep, they had oil. They had faith in Christ. They remained in the Word, confessing their sin because they knew that Christ's forgiveness would never run out. They hungered for what only Christ could give them - mercy and strength to persevere through the dark and bitter watches of the night.

What about this hour? Are you awake now? Are you joyously receiving the life-preserving oil Christ freely gives to all who seek it? We must hear this parable with every ounce of our attention. We simply cannot take seriously enough Christ's warning. The fact that Jesus is coming back shouldn't be what frightens us. If the thought of that day is frightening because you know you have fallen asleep, then there is only way to calm your fears - you need more oil. You need to return to the forgiveness and peace that Christ speaks. You need to remember that you are Baptized and that in Baptism, your failure to stay awake has been forgiven, your guilt pardoned. That oil, the benefits of Christ's atoning work, given freely as His forgiveness is preached and distributed, will light your way and bring you safely into the wedding hall. That oil will not fail and it will not run out.

But beware. YOU are not strong. YOU can't make it through the night and into the banquet hall on the laurels of the faith you once had. The foolish virgins believed that what Christ once began by His Word, they could sustain without Him, without His gifts. Their baptism was simply a bygone

memory. They had heard all the Bible stories. They had slogged their way through confirmation. But they doubted the difficulty of the night of waiting. They believed they were strong. But they were only foolish and their foolish pride got them nothing but the terrible and condemning words of Christ "I don't know you."

God's judgment against unbelief is real. Don't take it lightly. Don't think your sin is a small thing in God's eyes. Don't think that you can deal with it yourself. You can't. Return to the Lord and receive what He comes to give. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work." Hear the exhortation of the writer to the letter to the Hebrews "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Don't be like the foolish virgins. Don't be caught unawares.

Don't try to wait without the means Christ has given you. You can't. Christ doesn't give gifts you don't need. If He causes His Law and His Gospel to be preached, it's because you need to hear it. If He sends you a pastor to be His own ears and mouth to hear your confession and pronounce His absolution, it's because you have sins to confess and He has absolution you need to receive. If He says "Take, eat, drink" it's because you need this food to keep you alive and strong. Christ gives all these things to preserve you, to keep your faith alive and burning brightly so that you may see safely in the darkness and avoid the dangers that lay everywhere around you. These gifts lay low all pride and bring hope in the midst of the darkest despair. Faith needs Christ and the Means of Grace are where Christ has promised to be for you. Without these faith will, not might, will die. Christ Himself has ordained these things as the creators and sustainers of faith. Apart from them, we cannot live, and the day of the bridegroom's arrival will find us filled with terror, shut out of Christ's kingdom. But with them that day will one of joy as our hope finds all its fulfillment.

The day is surely drawing near and we don't know the day or the hour. But we don't need to. All we need to know is where we can find Jesus. As long as we have Him, as long as our ears are filled with His promises of

deliverance and faithfulness, then He will do the work of keeping us - of lifting us up when we have fallen, of delivering us in the hour of temptation, of comforting us in the hour of heartache and despair. As we are surrounded by the hope of Christ's death and resurrection, His final and complete victory over our sin and death, we find fresh strength to endure. Stay awake. Stay watchful. Stay close to Christ so that when He returns you may be fully ready, prepared to enter the banquet hall of your Lord and Savior's eternal joy.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.