

## **Every Ready, Wisely Tend Your Lamps**

SERMON TEXT: Matt. 25:1-13

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*Dearly beloved of God, our sermon text for this evening is taken from our Gospel text. Let us pray...*

*Heavenly Father, we await in earnest the second coming of Your Son, Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church that is to be His bride. We look to that day in anticipation because of the promise that a place has been prepared for us to feast at Your table and that we shall abide in Your presence to all eternity. By your indwelling Spirit, through Your Word and Holy Sacraments, You prepare us to take part in the festal procession that will bring us home to You. It is because of what You have done, in giving us Your Son, that we are made ready. Sustain us through Your Word that, in faith, our faith may increase and sustain us. Keep us ever vigilant and attentive to Your Word. Give us wisdom, O Lord, and keep us from folly. Amen.*

Dearly beloved in the Lord, the foolish virgins or, more accurately, the foolish bridesmaids in our Lord's parable remind me of a young man that I met awhile back, about a dozen, or so, years ago. Well, to be more precise, it's the description of the bridesmaids' attitude, alongside their imprudence, that invokes the memory of the lengthy conversation that I had with this particular young man so many years ago. It was while I was working part-time as the administrator of a health club in the greater Toronto area— keeping the odd hours necessary to facilitate and help finance my theological studies— that this young man (let's call him "John") strutted into the facility to get his fitness fix for the night. The gym was almost empty as it was

both midweek and almost midnight. “John” cast the keys to his Corvette across the counter as he passed the computer without bothering to swipe his card. His electric blue car covered the light blue logo emblazoned on the concrete to mark the spot as being for the use of those who’re handicapped. It was his connection with certain unsavoury members of the community that gave him an inflated sense of entitlement, an ego swollen well beyond the size of the muscles he’d come to the club to pump. He’d often come to the gym with one or two attractive young ladies on his arm, but this night he was by himself. We hadn’t really spoken to each other before that night. Prior to that night, the most I had ever said to him was usually in reply to his questions about the owner’s whereabouts. This night, however, was different. I can’t recall how we got to talking about matters of faith. Yet, while I don’t remember the particular segue that started such a discussion, I vividly remember much of what was said that night. It’s funny how that works, isn’t it? The truth is that I’ve had that kind of conversation countless times before, after, and ever since; yet, there’s a good reason why this one is etched in my mind. There’s also a good reason why this one will remain that way. You see, however the conversation started—which I still can’t recall—it continued as “John” worked his way from machine to machine completing set after set. I told him about both our sin and our Saviour. I spoke of both Law and Gospel. As he completed his workout, he continually asked questions as he rested in between sets and then encouraged me to continue responding as he moved to his next exercise. As we walked to what would be his last exercise for the night, he looked past my shoulder at a vehicle which slowed down by the entrance. As his companions for the night began to arrive, his interest in our conversation began to depart. “Yeah, this has been really interesting, but I’m young, I’ve got plenty of time to think about this kind of stuff when I’m

old,” he said dismissively. I was taken aback at first as his demeanour, which had changed over the course of our conversation, suddenly reverted back to its previous type. Still, I wasn’t about to let whatever progress was made fall by the wayside. I pleaded with him to be reasonable: “There are two things that you know for certain, these are undeniable facts: first, you will die one day; and, second, you don’t know when that day will come. It could be in the next sixty days, sixty minutes, or even sixty seconds. How can you so blithely balk at all we’ve discussed and just dismiss it? Do you really think it’s wise to put off for an uncertain tomorrow God’s call for today?” “I’m young,” he replied, “I’ll get religion when I’m an old man and I’ve got plenty of time to think about things like that... anyways, you can pray for me. I’m still young.” Our conversation was over. He threw on his jacket after getting the slight pump in his arms and pecs that he was after, grabbed his keys, and followed his fellows out into the night.

A couple of months passed. The health club owner’s nephew, over the course of a conversation primarily comprised of meaningless chitchat, asked me if I’d heard about what had happened to “John”. “No, why, what happened?” I asked. “He’s dead. He died a few nights ago after taking a spill on the highway on a motorcycle he stole.” So, while it wasn’t sixty seconds or sixty minutes, it appears that “John” only had about sixty days— give or take a few. Either way, he certainly didn’t have “plenty of time to think about things like that.” He didn’t get to “get religion” as an “old man”. I think you can now understand why that conversation stands out in my mind, why it’s etched in my memory. I think that you can also readily make the connection to our Lord’s parable.

Now, it should be noted that the bridesmaids in this parable are not to be equated with unbelievers *per se*, but rather they are to be numbered among those who profess faith in Christ.

After all, in the parable they are waiting for the coming of the bridegroom, who clearly represents Christ at the end of the age. Still, what “John” and these “foolish virgins” have in common is their attitude toward the inevitable. The “foolish virgins” along with the “wise virgins” knew that, as was the custom in ancient Israel, after the bridegroom had asked the bride to marry him with the consent of both parents, after the negotiation of the bride price, and after he had prepared a place for his bride that met with his father’s approval, the trumpet would sound and he would go over to the bride’s house at sometime during the early evening to escort her to the wedding banquet. The bride’s maiden companions—the virgins—would attend to the bride during the course of the wedding. However, on the way to the wedding banquet, at a point between the bride’s house and the place of the festival, they would wait for the bridegroom and bride to arrive, and then they’d join the procession, with their lamps lit, to escort them to the place of the wedding festival. What they were waiting for was the eventual blast of the trumpet and its attendant cry, “Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!” Yet, behold what happened, the bridegroom was delayed and came at midnight and caught them unaware and unprepared. They wanted to be a part of the wedding feast. They waited for the coming of the bridegroom to claim his bride. Yet, they were foolish in so far as they had not prepared their lamps for the procession and the festivities that followed.

What differentiates the foolish virgins from the wise is to be found in the flask of oil that when lacking will no longer fuel the lamp’s flame. So, what does the *flame* represent? It represents faith. It represents the faith that continues to go on unextinguished and burning brightly through the darkness of night, that is life in this world. It is a faith that needs to be fuelled until faith gives way to sight at the Second Coming. “When the Son of Man comes, will

he find faith on earth?” Yes, but not shining forth from the lamps of the foolish. So, what does the *oil* represent? What is it that the wise possess and the foolish lack. Is it good works and righteous living as many are naturally inclined to suggest and, in fact, have suggested? No. For we know that good works cannot save us. We know that it is only Christ’s good work in our place on the cross that can carry away our condemnation. Furthermore, as the Psalmist sings, “*Your Word* is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,” and as St. Paul writes, “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the *Word of Christ*.” Therefore, the Holy Spirit keeps *faith* alive through the preaching of the Gospel and the means of grace. The ministry of Word and Sacrament supplies the “oil” that fuels our faith and fills our flasks for the future. We store up Christ’s good work on our behalf, to our everlasting benefit, as we hear His Word and receive the heavenly treasures of His grace through His sacraments. The foolish thing to do is to dismiss His Word and allow His Sacraments to fall into disuse.

Yet, the truth is that, even though we know that the Bridegroom is coming and we know that we don’t know the hour nor the day, we nevertheless face the very real danger of falling asleep unprepared. Whether we are alive at His return or asleep in the grave before being called out by God’s trumpet blast and the voice of the Archangel to join the heavenward procession, we must be prepared. To fail is to be foolish. The wise will fill their flasks by returning to their baptismal birthright to be among God’s people as they gather around His Word and Sacraments. They do not take God’s gifts for granted. They do not shuffle off gathering around the Word of God that they need so that they can instead shuffle off on Sunday mornings to a part-time job for some extra cash to spend on their wants over and above their needs. They don’t stick it out of sight, putting it on ice, so they can set their sights to playing with sticks on ice. No. Rather,

they trim their lamps to keep the flame bright. They watch. They wait. They prepare. To do otherwise is to do what is foolish. To do what is foolish is to find oneself shut-out from the great feast.

In the end, no amount of pleading will change the outcome of a flame's last flicker. Only oil that will fuel it will suffice. No one can give you this oil which comes from God's Word and Sacraments alone. No amount of praying will help when it is too late to call out because the doors have been shut and the festivities have begun. Beloved in the Lord, God has given us lamp, fuel, and even kindled the flame's first flicker. He continues to give us what we need to be ready for His return— so because of Jesus, I am made ready and you are made ready! God gives us forgiveness through His Gospel, absolving us of our sins for His Christ's sake. Still, because God gives His grace through means— such as preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper— the very real danger exists of allowing such means to be taken for granted and even shunned altogether. In the Divine Service, we are being served by God Himself so as to be made ready for the day when His suffering servant, the very Son of God, returns in glory. Through our own preparations for that day, whenever that day will come, we serve to witness to those around us to awake and watch. Indeed, a recent study has concluded that about four fifths of the children of parents who attend church regularly and speak of their faith at home maintained their faith as adults. This is in stark contrast to those whose families attached little importance to matters of faith: only one percent continued to believe in their mid-to-late twenties. So parents, continue to communicate the importance of coming to church to your children. Grandparents, tell your grandchildren. You cannot share your oil, but you can bring them to where such fuel is to be found.

Dearly beloved of God, our Lord has not given us this parable to scold us. He has given it to us to warn us out of His great love for us. He has given and continues to give us all that we need to be ready. We are made ready as we avail ourselves of these good gifts. Through these gifts of grace the flame of our faith is fanned and fuelled. We don't know when the Bridegroom is coming. All we know is that He *is* coming. Will we then heed our Lord's warning and, therefore, watch? Will we make use of the means by which we are made ready? Will we be numbered among the wise? Or will we fool ourselves into thinking that we've "still got plenty of time to think about this stuff when [we're] old"? The Lord *has* come and the Lord *will* come again. Even so, come quickly Lord Jesus. Amen.

*May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN.*