

Being Ready Means You Can Sleep in Peace

The Last Sunday of the Church Year

The Twenty-Seventh Sunday after Trinity

November 26, 2023

Matthew 25:1–13

One of the many advantages of and reasons for following the Church Year is that it brings to our attention things we may forget or even want to avoid. This is clearly seen today on the Last Sunday of the Church Year, in which we are shown that the end of the world is coming. Most people do not believe this or do not know about it. They go through their life thinking nothing of Jesus returning on the last day for judgment. But we Christians are expecting it and we do not need to fear this judgment because we are in Christ. The judgment we will receive is everlasting life. This has implications for us for evangelism. We should tell those who do not know Jesus so that they too do not need to fear the judgment, which is everlasting torment.

But the focus as this Church Year comes to a close is not on all those out there who do not know Jesus. It is on those of us who do. The Gospel reading gives us the well-known parable of the ten maidens. They are all going out to see the bridegroom. It is a great day, they are excited! The picture Jesus is painting here is of God's people. We are excited for Jesus to return. He is pictured as the bridegroom. If this is a picture of God's people, then why does Jesus give a warning after telling the parable?—Watch out, because you do not know the day or the hour. If the maidens represent God's people, why are some of them left out at the end? Jesus gives this parable as a warning not to all those out there who do not know Him. This is a warning to those of us who do. There are plenty of warnings in the Bible to those who reject Christ. But on the last day of the Church Year we are the ones who are being warned that the last day of the world could come at any moment.

The end of the world will be similar to when God condemned the world in the flood. Wickedness became unrestrained and God brought His punishment on the world. Jesus spoke today's parable shortly after speaking of all the signs of the end. The end will come suddenly, and He compares this with the way things were before the flood. When He describes the people during that time He doesn't speak of their rampant wickedness. He simply says that they were going about their daily lives. They were doing ordinary things. They were eating and drinking and getting married. In our own time we see rampant wickedness. We are aware of some people who are truly evil. But many people just go about their day to day lives, and we recognize them as good people. Jesus' description of how things were right before the flood sheds light on God's judgment upon wickedness. It is not just the truly evil people who will be eternally condemned, it is everyone. Everyone is sinful, everyone is by nature against God. We see as Christians that the only way we escape this condemnation is through Christ and His making payment for sin in His sacrifice on the cross. When we believe in Christ we do not need to fear Him coming on the last day.

But we are shown in today's Gospel reading that there is a serious danger we Christians can fall into. Jesus' description of what people were doing before the flood sounds eerily similar to His description of the young maidens, all ten of them representing the holy Christian Church, God's people. They got their lamps ready. They went out to the place where the bridegroom would come. They're talking, they're getting excited, they can't wait! But the bridegroom is delayed. As they wait and wait they become drowsy and fall asleep. Jesus doesn't describe these girls as doing anything wicked. They aren't evil people.

In the middle of the night the cry goes out. The bridegroom is here, come out to meet him! Five of them are ready. They have their extra oil and they trim their lamps. They get up and they join the bridegroom as he enters the hall for the wedding feast. But the other five aren't ready. They had not brought extra oil for their lamps. Because the bridegroom was delayed their oil ran out and so their light was gone. When they ask the five who were prepared for some of their oil they are told no. There won't be enough for both of us, go and buy some. Unfortunately, while they're away buying oil the bridegroom comes and goes in with the girls who were ready to the big wedding celebration. When the other five finally get back the door is shut. They bang on the door. They cry out! Lord, Lord, open up for us! Then one of the most heartbreaking statements in all the Scriptures—he says to them, Truly I tell you, I do not know you. They are left out in the cold.

Why is it that they they're not welcomed into the big party? Was it because they were so wicked and evil? That's not how they are described. They were right along with the five wise maidens, they were looking forward to the bridegroom. They were excited to celebrate with him. It was because they weren't ready. They didn't prepare. Or, in the description of Jesus of those when the flood came, they were just going about their lives, living them without any care about God.

This is what Jesus means by describing those maidens who weren't prepared as foolish. They believed. They were in. But they became complacent. They began taking their being in the Church for granted. They gradually strayed farther and farther from God. They stopped going to church. They more and more ran out of time to read the Bible. There were always too many commitments and responsibilities and things to take care of to spend time in prayer. They were in, they believed they were saved, and so did not see a burning need to be in Bible Study with their fellow Christians. More and more activities encroached on their time and so they did not make a concerted effort to set aside time for God's blessings in Word and Sacrament. They recognized that they were living good, decent lives and not engaging in manifest wicked and evil actions and so disdained the preaching of the Word and eating and drinking the very body and blood Jesus gives them to partake of.

This is the real danger for you and me. When we are in we may take it for granted and go about our daily lives with no thought to devoting our time to the things Christ has expressly given to us: His Word, His Sacraments, and prayer. This is not to say we shouldn't go about our daily lives. We should. In fact, since God has saved us, this is exactly what He gives us to do. Since He has forgiven our sins, we love and serve and forgive others. One of the ways this is brought out is with the detail that when the bridegroom was delayed all the girls fell asleep. Being alert, being ready, doesn't mean that we must constantly fold our hands in prayer or spend our waking hours in this building. We are going to live our lives in the vocations, those callings God has given us, in which we care for others and serve them. We are going to take time to relax and have fun and to sleep.

Because we are not just taking God for granted, we can sleep in peace. You do not need to lay awake at night wondering if you will be ready when Christ, your Bridegroom, returns. You are ready. The Epistle reading speaks of another kind of sleep, the sleep of death. You need not fear this sleep either, you are at peace. Amen.

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