

Matthew 25:1-13
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Do you think you're wise, foolish, or a bit of both? Most of you know me well enough to have some idea of where I'll go with this today. Let's pray: ...

I'd like you to think about where there's light in your life and the world today, and where there's darkness in your life and the world today.

If I were to conduct a survey given what's going on around the world today, I'm sure I'd be inundated with responses based on how people feel and what they think about various issues. Take, for example, the recent referendum in Australia, the Russia/Ukraine conflict and the Israel/Hamas dilemma. I'm sure I'd get strong, emotionally charged responses based on what sides people take. But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm hinting at something far deeper than that. The key word in both proposals is: "your".

What do you see when you look into the lamp of your life? Is it full of oil, running out, or empty? Is the oil fresh or is it rancid? Is your lamp burning brightly or is it slowly fading away?

Light or darkness, full or empty lamps, fresh or rancid oil aren't about what's happening around us; rather, what's happening within us. They're metaphors for our spiritual condition, our inner way of being.

Spiritual nourishment and growth require regular access to Jesus. God's Holy Scripture has great power to change us, but only if we read it, study it, and hear how God loves us and would have us walk in his ways. Prayer can bring a grace-filled life, but only if we dedicate time and energy to it. Service to others has a transforming power, but only if we can look beyond our own selfishness to the needs of others.

You know what I think about jumping to conclusions too quickly, especially where Jesus' teachings are concerned. It would be so easy to divide and categorise the ten bridesmaids into two groups – the wise and foolish, the prepared and unprepared, the good and bad, the winners and losers, the welcomed and rejected. That's how we most often see things and how we compare ourselves to others because of our sin-distorted sense of justice and righteousness. But the gospel is far richer and deeper than the limitations we put on it. Sometimes we just need to relax, have an honest look at ourselves, and laugh at our thinking. That's why I thought I'd share this gem that I stumbled across while preparing this sermon:

A certain Dr Frederick Carl Eiselen, president of Garrett Seminary in Illinois, America, in the early 1900s, preached on this parable in chapel one day. When he reached the climax of his message, he yelled at his seminarians, "Young men, tell me, would you rather be in the light with the wise virgins, or out in the dark with the foolish virgins?" Such raucous laughter broke out that the chapel had to be dismissed early that day!

I believe that to divide the ten bridesmaids into two categories is to ignore or misunderstand what today's gospel says. All ten bridesmaids were a part of the kingdom. All ten were invited to the wedding banquet. All ten went to meet the bridegroom. All ten fell asleep. All ten had lamps. All ten were called to be carriers of the light. The only difference is that some carried light and others didn't. And that's true for every one of us.

We're also meant to be carriers of the light. "You are the light of the world," says Jesus in [Matthew 5:14]. And further on in [:16], "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven". When we obscure our light, darkness is added to the world.

Every day we either add to the light of the world or we add to its darkness. I know that because I've seen it in my own life and I'm sure you've seen it in yours too.

When I break relationships; dismiss the needs, concerns, or hopes of others; or act as if I have no need of him or her; my world becomes darker. And when I remain open and receptive, compassionate, and recommit to loving my neighbour as myself, a new light emerges and shines.

When I carry grudges and resentments, nurse old offenses, or refuse to forgive someone, I add to the darkness. But when I offer mercy, forgiveness, and seek reconciliation, I let my light shine in the world.

When, in my marriage or other relationships, I put myself at the centre, act like a pillock, prioritise my needs and desires above anyone else's, I'm living in a dark place. But when my concern is for the wellbeing of others, I prioritise their needs, I act as though they truly matter, I add to the light of the world.

When I think, speak, or act with violence; deny another's dignity; act with indifference to another's well-being, I darken this world. But when I turn the other cheek, work for justice, recognise the dignity of every human being, I add to the light of the world.

When I get stuck in my way as the right way or the only way, assume I know more and better than others, close myself to new truths, ideas, or possibilities, I stand in a darkness of my own making. But when I recognise my need for others; let go of comparisons, suspicions, and judgements; risk not being in control or having all the answers, I begin to see the world in a new light, with new possibilities.

What do you see when you look at your life and world today?

When I look at my life and world today, I see light. And when I look at my life and world today, I see darkness. That's true for everyone. None of us are all light or all darkness. We're all a mixture of both. Sometimes I add light to the world and at other times I add darkness.

I don't think the question is whether there is darkness today in our life and world. There is. The question is: What are we going to do about it?

Every time I live in that dark place, every time I add darkness to the world, I betray the gospel of Jesus, myself, and the values I claim to hold. And when I do, I have to justify that betrayal. I blame, criticise, and refuse to look at myself. It's someone else's fault. They got what they deserved. I didn't do anything wrong.

And in that moment, I no longer know myself. I'm not the light carrier I want to be or who God created me to be. No wonder Jesus says to the five bridesmaids, "I do not know you." He's speaking to the darkened part in each of our lives. It's not so much a rejection as it's a reminder to reignite the light within us, a call to let our light shine.

What does that mean and look like for you today? What does the mark on the dipstick say about the level of your oil? If you're low, what are you going to do about it? What's going on in the lamp of your life?

The world needs your light. There's not a person or a place in our world today that's not in need of light. The Middle East and Northern Europe need great floods of it right now. Your light makes a difference. You can push back the darkness with your light of love, hope, healing, forgiveness, gentleness, compassion. The light of Christ is already within you. Jesus says exactly this in [Matthew 5:14], "You are the light of the world."

So, let's leave this place today, Saints, face our darkness, and shine our light. I know we can do it because it was God who first said, "'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness" (Genesis 1:3,4). God the Father has set us apart from sin so that we are empowered to do what he ordains in [2 Corinthians 4:6], "Let light shine out of darkness". We have encouragement from God the Son, Jesus, who says, "You are the light of the world". We have the fire of God the Holy Spirit burning in our hearts [Matthew 3:11], and we have all the company of heaven egging us on. Shine with the radiance of God's love, my dear brothers and sisters, and give him all glory, honour and praise. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in the light of Christ's love. Amen.