

Sermon Pentecost 23A November 08 2020

Matthew 25:1-13

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you partygoers, from God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Let's pray:

Today, I'll start with a short overview so you can have a snooze and I'll wake you up when I've finished the long version. Deal?

Five foolish bridesmaids; five wise. Five cursed; five blessed. The difference? The blessed accept their acceptance and the cursed don't. You see, the acceptance, or forgiveness, is always on offer for both groups. Grace is always sovereign. Worded plainly, heaven is populated forgiven sinners and hell is populated by... forgiven sinners. Wait! What? Come again. "Heaven is populated by forgiven sinners and hell is populated by forgiven sinners." Friends, the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the... world [κόσμος, kosmos], not just a chosen few (John 1:29). Again, in chapter 12 Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all* [πάντας, pantas] people to myself" [:32]. Hence, the difference between heaven and hell is simply that those in heaven accept divine forgiveness, while those in hell reject it. The precise hell of hell is its refusal to open the door to Jesus and the reconciled, who knock endlessly, for permission to bring in the Supper of the Lamb ['Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me' Revelation 3:20]. Jesus wills the eternal picnic to begin. The party poopers don't have forever to go on praying for rain. The end.

Ten bridesmaids take their lamps and go to meet the bridegroom. The image is as delightful as it is innocent. Ten young girls are on their way to a party. They're excited to the point of giggliness. The risk of missing out on a wedding invitation is past and it's all coffee and cake from here on in. But, "Five of them were foolish, and five were wise."

The foolish live by what they can see. They're those whom "God has made foolish" (1 Corinthians 1:20-25). They sail through life as though nothing will ever go wrong and are unprepared for things they believe will never happen.

The wise live by faith. They trust the foolishness of God in Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:20-25). They're prepared for any contingency, no matter how unlikely.

The point of the story is that, in this world, something always goes wrong: "The bridegroom was delayed."

The giggling continues into the night. The lamps are lit and the girls chat about boyfriends, the latest trends at the markets, and how they would just die if their parents found out that... The wedding feast turns into a sleepover. "But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'"

Three things. First, this is a parable of the world as it really is. Unexpected things happen regularly. And they happen in the style of the old joke about Jesus and Moses playing golf:

Moses, Jesus and an old man were playing golf. They came to a fairway with a water trap. Moses strode up to tee off first and drove the ball straight into the water. Moses parted the water, took another shot, and the ball landed next to the cup. Jesus was up next. He took his shot and the ball ended up in the same waterhole. Jesus walked out onto the water and took another shot. His landed even closer to the cup. The old man stepped up and took his shot. The ball landed in almost the same spot, in the middle of the water. But a frog came by and picked up the ball. It started to hop away when an eagle swooped down on it and carried it over the green. As it flew over, the frog dropped the ball which then rolled into the cup for a perfect hole-in-one. Moses then turns to Jesus and says, "I don't like playing golf with your Father."

Second, and difficult to swallow; God colludes in our failures and in the slapstick way the world is run. After all, who ultimately is responsible for what should have been enough oil in the foolish girls' lamps, running out? The bridegroom's! It's the age-old question of God and evil. Why doesn't God get rid of sin and stop creating more sinners? There's no answer of course except ones like Job's: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" [NRSV, 1:21] or, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" [NKJV, 13:15]. No answer except Jesus', "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

Third, "Behold, the bridegroom!" is the church's catch-cry as we begin every Christian year with the season of Advent. Here, is the hint as to how we make sense of both the slapstick comedy of history and the involvement of God in evil. It's only by faith in Jesus Christ that we have access to the forgiveness and reconciliation that lies behind the mess of history. All we need is the faith to accept the reconciliation, no questions asked, from the hand of the one who brings it, no questions answered.

Significantly, Advent is the church's annual celebration of the silliness (derived from *selig*, German for "blessed") of salvation. Life really is one gigantic, divine hoot because God has fudged everything in our favour. We can rejoice in anticipation of his second coming without guilt, shame, or fear. Sure, there's dirt under the divine Deliverer's fingernails but, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge... Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38:2;4). The main thing is, God's got the goods and he's given us the faith to say: "Lo, he comes with clouds descending. Hallelujah, and three cheers!"

Great for us, but what about the crisis of unfaith? What about those who trim their wicks only to find that the oil is running low; who think there's something more plausible than the mystery? The bridegroom is late for his

own party. God has taken so long to show up that the unfaithful have dug their own grave in the meantime.

The foolish girls go to the dealers to buy more oil for their lamps, but they miss the main event. Time has finally run out, as it eventually does in real life. And as faith is something deeply fundamental to real life, sadly, the time for faith has run out also (see The rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31).

I'm too orthodox a Christian to try to find a way to remove hell from the scriptural equation of the final reconciliation. I'm also not authorised to suggest a limit on God's patience with unfaith. But the parable indicates clearly enough, I think, that since faith is a relationship with God, there'll undoubtedly come a time when he'll say whether a relationship exists or not. No one can get away with saying "maybe" forever. If we trust, we are trusters, adopted by and the possession of him whom we trust. If we distrust, we are distrusters, closed off from the only relationship with reality that matters.

The parable closes with: 'And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' God shuts the door on the foolish wisdom of the world. Those with oil to spare – the faithful, the wise fools willing to trust him in their lastness, lostness, leastness, and death – have gone into the party. The savvy, worldly types who thought they had it all figured out, are outside in the dark, with no oil and definitely no fun. That terrifying sentence, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you," is simply the truth of their condition. Jesus doesn't say, "I never called you" or "I never loved you" or "I never drew you to myself." He says, "I don't know you because you never bothered to know me."

"Be watchful," Jesus says, "for you know neither the day nor the hour." When it's all said and done; when we've scared ourselves silly with the urgency of faith and finality of judgement; we need to take a deep breath

and let it out with great laughter. Because what we're watching for is a party, the great wedding feast that lasts forever. And the party's not somewhere down the road making up its mind when to come to us. It's already knocking on our front door. The unknown day and hour of it finally bursting in and rollicking its way through the whole house is all part of the divine lark of grace.

God isn't our fussy aunt, coming to see whether her wedding-present china has been chipped. He's our delightful Old Uncle with bratwurst under one arm and a fine bottle of Barossa red under the other. Sure, we need to be vigilant and watch for him; but only because it would be such a pity to miss out on the outrageous fun. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.