

Saint Paul Church 11/08/20 A.D. Saint Matthew 25: 1-13.

Have you ever been unprepared? I'll never forget the afternoon I conducted a funeral for one of the members of my former congregation in my first year. As we drove into the cemetery, I noticed two tents set up and people gathered at both. I was riding with the funeral director so I asked him which tent was ours.

When we got there, I conducted the graveside and when I was finished with my former parishioners, the Funeral Director walked over, took me aside, and said: "I need you to do another graveside," I asked when. He said, "Right now" and began to explain to me that the family gathered under the other tent had been waiting for over an hour for their pastor to show up. He had called and said he was lost. He had taken a wrong turn and gone East instead of West and it would be at least another hour, if not longer before he could get there.

I was a little shocked and caught off guard but said, "Sure I can do that, just make sure you get me a copy of the obituary and information before I get over there." The Assistant Funeral Director took off with the good news for the family. I said my good-byes to the former parishioner's family and then headed over to the other graveside preparing in my head, what I would say. When I got there the family was standing in three very distinct groups. And it was obvious there was some family turmoil and tension going on. The family was cordial but ready to get it over with.

As I started the brief liturgy, I realized that I didn't have the obituary or clergy information sheet that the funeral homes always give me. There I was in the middle of a funeral and I had no clue what child of God I was blessing before their burial. I didn't know if this was a man or a woman. I had no idea what age this person was or even where they were from or how they had died.

The family wasn't paying much attention to me anyway. They were just being tolerant and it was obvious they were just barely tolerating being with each other. That hour of waiting hadn't helped at all. I've got to tell you that was the shortest graveside liturgy I think I've ever done.

I closed with prayer and while I was praying, I felt a piece of paper being slipped into my hand. The funeral director finally showed up with the clergy information sheet. I was able to use the young woman's name and ask God to strengthen this family in the face of her tragic death. I pronounced the benediction and that group of people took off like their feet were on fire.

I've never felt so unprepared and locked out of what was going on in my whole life. I think I know a little what the foolish bridesmaids in today's parable must have felt like.

In Saint Matthew's Gospel of the 25 chapter, the five foolish bridesmaids were unprepared and consequently locked out.

Before we look at how we can understand and apply this passage to our lives today. Let me give you a little background on how I understand the wedding traditions of the day.

First, most families were what we would call extended families. Grandpa and Grandma, mom, and dad, the kids, the whole nine yards all lived in more or less a complex of houses all joined together. Each family had their own space for sleeping and privacy but much of the space was communal in nature. When a young man married, his wife left her family and legally became a part of the groom's family. Sort of like adoption. While there were still emotional ties to her family. There were no legal ties or obligations, for she now belonged to her husband.

When this new wife came to be a part of the young man's family, that private space had to be built. And Dad was the one to tell the son when it was ready when it was sufficient for the new bride.

Let's face it, most young men are so excited about marriage and the wedding night that they would throw up any old structure just to get their sweetheart home with them. And the bride wouldn't mind, at first. But after the newness and excitement wore off, she would begin to notice how shabby the surroundings were. Which could and probably would cause major concern.

So, Dad, knowing how raging hormones can distract, was the one who oversaw the construction of the new daughter-in-law's living space. Dad was the one to tell the Groom when he could go. When everything was ready, the groom and his family and bridal party would head to the bride's house for the wedding. A loud trumpet would play. There would be shouting and laughter and rejoicing.

The Bridesmaids were part of the wedding party. They were critical to the success of the wedding. Their purpose was to help the Bride get ready and watch for the coming of the Groom. So, they needed to be ready and vigilant.

Only the father of the groom knew the exact hour when things would start because he was the one who knew when the home was finished. Now, I'm sure there was some coordination between the parents but technically there didn't have to be. The Father of the Groom, alone, knew the hour and the day. So, everyone had to be ready and stay ready.

Jesus describes His Second Coming in terms of a wedding. He even refers to the Church as His Bride, He is the Groom, preparing a place for us with His own hands. You and I, as part of the Church, are called to be the Bridesmaids. And we're called to be ready and live ready. We know that one day, Christ will return. That's His promise. The Left Behind series of books has sold millions creating a fictionalized account of what they might be like. It too, emphasizes being and living ready.

There are four things we can all do to be ready and live ready.

The very first step is to show up and bring your lamp along.

What I mean by that is simply to accept and answer "Yes!" to the call God has made in your life. We're all called by God. That's one of the ongoing witnesses of the New Testament. Saint Paul even reminds us of that in 1 Corinthians 1:9. He writes: "God is faithful; by him, you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." [NRSV]

Part of answering that call is showing up and bringing your lamp.

Some coach somewhere once said: "Half of winning the game is just showing up." How many times have we watched sports on TV and noticed how our favorite teams play the game but not show up to get the job done. They were on the field but just barely. It was like the whole team was somewhere else. Things didn't click. To put it in the terms of our parable, they weren't ready, they didn't bring their lamp.

We're called to live ready. We're called to be prepared. We're called to be faithful. The first step is to show up and bring your lamp.

The second step is to refresh the oil.

It's amazing how much we grow to depend on the simple acts of one or two people, isn't it? We're grateful that someone has chosen to do those small things, like dressing the altar and Sanctuary by changing the Paraments to whatever color the season or Sunday calls for.

We very seldom ever notice the two main candles on the altar because Debbie Szymanski refreshes the two main Eucharistic candles with oil every week. The only time we really notice is when she's is away and the light from the candles starts to fade and flicker because no one else has refreshed the oil. Generally what happens is that the candles flicker and go out. This happened just a couple of Sundays ago. She and I both forgot to fill them.

The truth is, sometimes, so do all of us. Sometimes it seems like we're just going through the motions. We haven't taken the time in our busy schedules to refresh the oil.

That's what Sabbath is for. "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." That's what Deuteronomy 5:12 says. That's one of the Ten Big Ones. That's number Four on God's Top Ten list.

Jesus reminded us in Saint Mark's Gospel 2:27: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath." [NRSV]

Sabbath is a day of rest, a day of refreshing the oil of our faith. Sabbath isn't about not doing anything. It isn't about not selling anything. It's all about rest. It's about Honoring God and Resting and Relaxing in God and with God. It's about downtime. It's preventive maintenance. It's the fuel for the vehicle of our faith. It's the Anti-Virus Software for our Soul. Sabbath and worship are about refreshing the oil in our lamps so we don't flicker and burnout.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews 12:28 writes: "Do you see what we've got? An unshakable kingdom! And do you see how thankful we must be? Not only thankful but brimming with worship, deeply reverent before God. . ." [Msg]

Let me show you this way. Our lives are kind of like a water jug and glass. Everything we do takes a little out of us. Our work, our family, our time spent serving God through the work of the church our hobby, whatever, everything takes a little bit out of us. Before long we're empty. There's nothing more to give, nothing more to take.

But then we take Sabbath time, we take time for personal worship and reflection. We spend time in prayer. We come to church and worship with our family and friends. We sit at the foot of the Master and find our spirits refreshed. We bring our burnt out, dried up lamps to the Savior and we are refreshed. And the endless spring of life fills and refreshes our souls.

The second step is to refresh the oil of our lamp through Sabbath time and Worship. Trim your lamp.

The third step is to trim your lamp or trim your wick.

I'm sure some of you remember using coal oil lamps. My great-grandfather and great-grandmother lived in rural Virginia before electricity was available in the Blue Ridge mountains. I remember my mother telling me stories about going to their house and using oil lamps at night and how the flames would dance across the walls and ceilings. I also remember my mom saying that she would help my great-grandmother trim some of the burnt ends off the wick. She said it helped make the oil burn brighter and cleaner. You could adjust how much of the wick was burned. By raising and lowering the wick you could increase or decrease the amount of light. I have many of those lamps in my house today.

During the time Jesus told this parable, they used a lamp similar to this. Lamp trimming was for conservation and for the best possible light. When bridesmaids slept; they pushed the wick in a little so as to save oil. When they woke and needed the light; they pulled the wick out a little to increase the size of flame and amount of light. Trimming the lamp was the early dimmer switch or three-way bulb. Jesus told us to be careful about how we live and how we walk in our faith journey. He told us that He was coming back. He told us to trim our lamps so we can focus on Him. And be ready when He does.

In Saint Luke's Gospel 21:34 Jesus says: "But be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap." (LSB)

The third step is to trim your wick.

And finally, this parable teaches us to bring plenty of oil.

When we bring plenty of oil, we've made sure that we've taken that Sabbath Rest and spent time with God. We may look empty, But really, we are quite full. We can look empty and depleted but through God's grace, we are really quite full.

Jesus told the woman at the well in Saint John's Gospel 4:13-14 "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." [NRSV]

By putting our lives into the hands of the one who came to save us; by trusting in Jesus completely, we can and will have plenty of Oil. Be prepared, trust in Christ. Remember to bring plenty of oil.

In one of her articles, Erma Bombeck told of a little boy named Donald who talked about education and the fears of going to school.

“My name is Donald, and I don’t know anything. I have new underwear, a loose tooth, and didn’t sleep last night because I’m worried. What if a bell rings and a man yells, “Where do you belong?” and I don’t know? What if the trays in the cafeteria are too tall for me to reach? What if my loose tooth comes out when we have our heads down and are supposed to be quiet? Am I supposed to bleed quietly? What if I splash water on my name tag and my name disappears and no one knows who I am?”

Life is like that sometimes. Who am I kidding, life is like that most of the time. Most of the time we’re scared speechless about what the future will bring. Most of our stress and tension comes from dealing with the unknown. We’re even afraid that when Christ returns that for some unknown reason, we’ll miss it.

We read passages like this and sometimes it just scares the be-jeebers out of us. God knows that. And that’s precisely why God took off the royal robes of heaven, put on the earthly rags of our flesh and blood and stepped into our lives as Jesus. Jesus came to blaze the trail. He came to show us the way. And He came to walk with us every step of the way. Even when we splash water on our name tags and no one knows who we are, Jesus knows who we are and He is there to hold us up and guide us through the most difficult times of this earthly life.

God stooped down and entered the doorway of human experience in Jesus. And in Jesus, God offers us new life. All we’re asked to do is accept that new life and to live prepared. We’re called to be like the wise Bridesmaids. In Saint Matthew 22:14 Jesus said: “Many are called, but few are chosen.” [NRSV] We have been called and chosen. All we have to do is tend our lamps and be ready.

We’re called to show up and bring our lamps, my dear brothers and sisters. We’re called to refresh the oil. We’re called to trim our wicks to make them last longer and brighter. And we’re called to bring plenty of oil that God has provided for our use to further His kingdom.

Thanks be to God. Amen.