

Sermon Text: Matthew 25:1-13

It is football season. It reminds me of some stories from my not so illustrious high school career. At this time, I will make the confession of one of the most embarrassing stories from my high school career. I will never forget, at age sixteen, the one and only game my father came to see at Clinton High School. I started varsity defensive tackle. Against Clinton High School! Big time! At halftime we were close, and Coach Varner was at his best firing us up. I can't quote everything he said in church, but essentially it was, "We can beat Clinton! Much bigger school, but we can do it! You have to want to do it. Do you want to do it?" "Yes!" "Are you ready to play?" "Yes!" Time to play. I was fired up. We sprinted to the sideline, and I stood right next to the head coach, and we kicked off, and it was time for the defense to take the field. Coach Varner started yelling, "There are only ten men on the field! Who's not out there? Who's not out there?" Trying to be helpful, I turned around; I was fired up, and said, "Hey! Who's on defense? Who's not out there?" It was I! My first and only game starting as defensive tackle, fired up on the sidelines, it does not help in the game. I was full of enthusiasm, but I was not doing my part on the field.

Now, in some older translations, it talks of these maidens, or the wise virgins, and the foolish virgins or maidens or bridesmaids. The wise maidens were waiting for the bridegroom, and when he came, they woke up ready to shine their light, ready to do their part in the celebration, and the foolish ones were dressed up, on the sidelines, but not ready to take the field. Not ready! Not prepared! Now, this parable has been interpreted in many ways, and the traditional way is about the final judgment. In or out! Ready or not! Full or empty! It's serious business. We need to know how to take this parable personally.

Imagine this scene. One Dr. Eislen, president of Garrett Seminary years ago, preached on this serious business in chapel one day in a room full of future preachers, and when he reached the climax of his message, he yelled at the seminarians, "Young men, tell me! Would you rather be in the light with the company of the bridegroom or out in the dark with the foolish virgins?" When the laughter stopped, they dismissed chapel early that day.

Seriously, if we take a sober look at the parable, it seems to say clearly that it is possible to begin to prepare to meet God, to be dressed in faith or some semblance of it, and to wait in anticipation, to have some oil in your lamp, but somehow not really be ready, not really be prepared. Oil is traditionally thought to be faith or the Holy Spirit or a combination of faith, which leads to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Either way, the parable seems to say that they all had oil in their lamps. They were all dressed and ready and waiting, but some did not prepare well enough, not well enough to make it through the dark, uncertain hours before the bridegroom arrived. This is troubling! It is always troubling when Jesus' words violate our theology, but here it is. Three parables in a row, in the 25th chapter of Matthew, with apparent judgment messages. Invited maidens with oil for light, as they waited, but not enough oil, not enough light to be found ready. They could have prepared, but they did not, and so they were cast out. The next parable is about talents, and that is a unit of money. It was given with an expectation of return, and out of fear, one man did nothing, and he was cast out. The final parable unmistakably deals with the judgment, the sheep and the goats. You know the one. They were divided up by

what they did or did not do when they saw others in need. If they could have helped and did nothing, they were cast out. Read the entire 25th chapter of Matthew. There seems to be an overarching message of “use your time to prepare to meet God”, “use your money in ways that show you understand it is God’s money entrusted to you, and he expects a return”, and finally, “use the opportunities you have to help, to show God’s compassion one on one”. Three messages, three parables, all with judgments in the end. Here, in this parable for today, we have these dressed up maidens whose job it was to meet and light the way of the bridegroom when he finally arrived, and they all fell asleep, and when they awoke, some were found to be unprepared, were found to be out of all. If oil does indeed continue that Old Testament symbolism of blessing and anointing and presence of God, then we must be the unready maidens as those who had the form of faithfulness, but not the heart. The dress of faithfulness, but no light of Christ, no presence of God’s spirit within. They were empty. They were empty. They were the ones who knocked, and heard the bridegroom respond, “I never knew you.” Now, this is very distressing because I understand if a faith is of some sort of indulgent God, who says, “Aw, come on in, you knucklehead! It really doesn’t matter.” The other wedding garment story from a few weeks ago and this one together say that you can respond to God’s invitation, and in the very end, when it really counts, find yourself thrown out, unrecognized. Or as the prodigal son, stay-at-home brother does, who stays on the porch, and refuses to go into the celebration. You can find yourself unready or unwilling to join God’s celebration. In the wedding banquet story, a special garment was provided by the king, and the man thrown out in that story apparently refused to put it on. He was invited, but the clean, white robe symbolizing the righteousness of Christ, he refused to wear. He tried to stay in the celebration of the Kingdom of God on his own merit. Imagine, a tuxedo was provided at the door, but he came in wearing rags! Christ’s righteousness was provided yet he wore his own pitiful good deeds as a laughable badge of honor. The foolish maidens thought their preparations were enough. They ran out! As Christ’s righteousness was symbolized as a wedding garment that covered our filthy rags, then here the oil in the lamps could be the power to provide God’s light in the world, the power to glow from within, the power to reflect the light of Christ in the world. You see, all through the Old Testament, oil equals blessing or anointing or friendship or relationship. You remember the lines from the 23rd Psalm; “Thou welcomed me in and anointed my head with oil.” Relationship, friendship, oil means all those things, and here bespeaks the relationship of faith in God, which leads to the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, and then shining forth in our lives in deeds. Simply put, their light went out. Their faith went out. They had no power to shine from within. They were all dressed up. This is a pun. Wait for it. They were all dressed up with no way to glow. Okay. My wife said not to say that.

Light has always symbolized and signified God’s presence. Soon, at Christmas, we will hear the prophet Isaiah’s words again about the Messiah from Isaiah 9, “The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light, and those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, and we can feel that, on them has light shined.” In Matthew, when Jesus was transfigured on the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter and James and John, and it said His faith in his garment shown brighter than the sun. In John 8, and we’re studying the Gospel of John on Wednesday nights, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” There’s a warning in John 12. Jesus said, “You better walk in the light while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you.” While you

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have the light, believe in the light that you may become children of the light. The Apostle Paul, speaking of Jesus’ teaching, says, “The light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ who is the likeness of God.”

I know that people hate it when a preacher quotes too much scripture. The only thing worse is when I ask personal questions, and so I’ll do both today. Have we prepared inside to join that party? Have we known our need and accepted the righteousness of Christ to cover our sins? Do we have the power of the Holy Spirit within to enable us to shine forth God’s light in the darkness of this world? Does anybody disagree that the world is now a very dark place? Do we have faith and spirit enough to give generously of our time and talent and money and compassion for others? If not, do we really think that we’re good enough on our own? Do we think that God will surely let us in, let us stay, forgive us our lack of preparation, our lack of faith, lack of oil in our lamps, so to speak, lack of readiness on the sidelines? This is very heavy stuff, but note in one parable a garment was provided, but refused, and in this one, oil was available beforehand, but not secured. The warning seems to be prepare, prepare. Just barely enough faith, or external faith, will not be enough to make it through the darkness.

Have you seen these commercials? I remember seeing them back in the summer for batteries where the kids are at a camp out, telling ghost stories, and you see the flashlights on in four or five tents, then one tent at a time, it gets dim and then dark, and then dim and then dark until finally all the kids are crowded, scared, into one tent where the flashlight is still working. That’s the tent with the good batteries. This illustration was brought to you by Energizer. We’re now selling ad space in the sermons to meet the budget. Next week, we’ll have NASCAR patches on the robes.

The foolish maidens of the parable seemed dressed and ready, but they had little light, and it went out in the long wait of the night. This seems to call to mind the parable of the sower. You remember where the seed of the Word was scattered everywhere, and in one place, it began to grow. What happened? It was choked out by the weeds and the thorns. In another place, the seed of the Word began to grow, but the roots could not grow deep enough, and it dried out. Here, they had a little light, a little oil, but no reserve for the long darkness in which they waited. If the oil is blessing and the presence of God’s spirit, then the only place to get that is in a close connection to God. The only place to get oil like that is from God, and so we can surmise that they were disconnected from God. Their relationship, their connection, was broken. They were alone in the dark on the outside, and when they knocked, they heard, “I never knew you.”

I’m thinking of another verse that might help explain this. Arguing with the Pharisees, who were filled with spiritual pride, Jesus said in the Gospel John, the 9th chapter, “If you were blind, if you really were blind, you would have no guilt, but since you say, ‘We see’, your guilt remains.” You see, when you claim to be adequate before God, when you claim to understand the things of God and to be holy enough without accepting the Savior God has provided, you’re blind. You’re in the dark, in the dark about your own sinfulness, your own need for a Savior, or perhaps you do not understand God’s Holiness. We all need a Savior, and the good news is that we have one in Jesus Christ. We need faith and the indwelling of God’s spirit to give power to that faith, and we can have it for the asking. If you think you don’t need a Savior, you cast yourself out of the

party. If you think you don't need faith or power from God to actually be a loving, forgiving, compassionate person, if you think you can do that on your own, without God's help, then you cast yourself out of the party. God's comfort, God's presence, God's Son are all gifts to us. We refuse them, we remain on the sidelines. We remain empty. We remain alone in the dark. Many people argue about, and have different ideas in the Christian community about faith and falling away. I always return to Romans, the 11th chapter, where it says, “Note the kindness and severity of God, severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in this kindness, otherwise you, too, will be cut off.” Many people have different ideas, but as Methodists we have always emphasized faith as a relationship, one begun and offered by God in Christ, one we grow in through the spirit and working out our faith over a lifetime. Our goal is nothing less than putting on the mind of Christ, having the mind that was in Christ in us. Our goal is holiness, being set apart for God's use, a goal we cannot achieve without God's power, God's light within us. I ask you, disconnected from God, how can we grow? Disconnected from the source of love and life and light, how can we love our enemies, or how can we even love ourselves as forgiven people? How can we shine? How can we be generous and compassionate? Disconnected from God, we are alone. Two things are needed. First, accepting the righteousness of Christ, and secondly, being found faithful in the end. Trusting not in our own righteousness, but unwrapping, unwrapping and using the gift of grace that God has given us in Christ. Preparation, faithfulness, and compassion are all required. This parable, along with the other parables in the 25th chapter, say the bridegroom will come. There will be a confirmation of the Kingdom, and only those well prepared inside and out will experience it. Some things cannot be borrowed. Some things cannot be borrowed such as a relationship with God.

William Barclay wrote, “The foolish virgins found it impossible to borrow oil when they discovered they needed it.” Someone cannot borrow a relationship with God; he must possess it for himself. You cannot borrow character. You must be clothed with it yourself. We cannot always be living on the spiritual capital, which others have amassed. There are certain things we must win or acquire for ourselves for we cannot borrow them from others. Neither can we piggyback on the generosity nor the compassion of others. There are things we must do for ourselves.

Ella, whom we baptized a moment ago, will have the opportunity at confirmation when she is 12 or so to stand before this congregation or another, and profess her faith for herself.

I remember once when, as I have told you many times, my Southern Baptist friends would invite me to their revivals as an example sinner. I remember once when the revival minister asked me afterwards if I were a Christian, and I did say, “I was born into the Methodist church.” He said, as some of you have heard, this old saying, but it was my first time, “If you were born in the back seat of a car, would that make you a Chevrolet?” I was amazed because how did he know we had a Chevrolet!

Faith is a relationship though, and that part is true. It matters whether we are connected or disconnected from God. The parable opens on a note of hope, and it closes on a note of urgency. We all make choices for or against God, and we do this continuously. Taken as a whole, the 25th

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chapter says prepare for yourself, #1, and in the talent it says, the money you have belongs to God, give God a return on his investment in you, and three, it says show compassion when you can, God keeps notes. Don't trust in self or works on your own. Don't hear me say that. Trust in God, but prove your faith. Prove your faith by your works. This faith of ours shows if it is real. A successful life lived in the Gospel costs. It cost Jesus, didn't it? The Gospel shows a life lived and ended faithful to God, trusting God is a life lived and ended well, and even if there is a cross, God can speak beyond the cross and beyond death, and redeem every part of who we are.

A middle-aged bookstore customer, obviously annoyed, said to one of the clerks, “Every time I come in here to buy a bestseller, you're sold out! Why can't you people learn to stock your shelves more efficiently?” The clerk said, “What is the title of the book you wish to purchase, ma'am?” She said, “The title is How to Remain Young and Beautiful.” The clerk said, “Very well, I'll place your order for How to Remain Young and Beautiful at once. I'll mark it 'Urgent'.” We waste our time dealing urgently with matters that are unimportant, and we devote little or no time dealing with things that truly are urgent. Our faith in God, inside and out. Our relationship with others as it proves our faith in God. Is there oil in your lamp? Is there the light of Christ in your life? Are you giving God a return on his investment in you? Do you show compassion or do you look the other way? We follow Jesus. You know what He did. Examine yourselves, and see where you have grown in the love of God and neighbor, and also see where you have hatred burrowed in or hurt or harmful habits, and ask yourself, “Has my heart grown cold? Is there oil, is there faith, is their trust, is there the power to live the Christian life in my life, and if not, need I pray for it?” Are you letting God's spirit grow you even now? Do you think you are as good as you can possibly be? You see, I don't believe that. I think there is always more with God. There is always faith and then deeper faith. There is always another way we can show our faith and faithfulness. There is always more to become, more to give, more to love, more to heal, more light to spread in the darkness of this world to people who are just wandering around, looking for hope, and we are it. Only you and God know the answers to all these questions. Are you closer to full or empty? Are you warm or cold? Ready or not? Faith in God and Christ is important. It is too important to leave unattended or leave for later because it is amazing how quickly it becomes too late. Is there oil in your lamp? Let us pray.

Holy Father, we tend to cruise through life as if things are fine or at least tolerable and will go on this way forever, but we know one day we shall meet, not through a glass darkly, but face to face. One day we shall give an account of all the opportunities we have to love and to share and to give hope and to forgive and to rid ourselves of bitterness and hatred and judgmentalism and critical nature, and Father, when we give that account, Lord, lead us now. Lead us now to deal with the things that you have put upon our heart to deal with now so that we may be found ready, be found faithful, be found good stewards of what you have invested in us and be found compassionate in this moment and not just in this place, but in our homes and workplace. Amen.