

The Last Sunday of the Church Year

Matthew 25:1-13

The warnings of judgment that we've heard the last two Sundays are for all people. All people need to know that we are living in the end times. All people need to know that they will die. All people need to know that after they die they will face judgment. Some will be judged righteous because they despise their own righteousness and depend upon the perfect righteousness that Jesus gives them through faith. Some will be judged wicked because they depend upon their own righteousness which is like filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6) The righteous will enter into the inheritance won by Jesus with His perfect life and death. They will "live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." (SC) The wicked will enter into the place prepared for Satan and his angels to suffer eternally.

Today's warning is an in-house warning. Jesus is speaking to His church.

"The Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom." (v. 1)

In this parable, virgin means believer. The virgins are those who have swapped their filthy-rag righteousness for Christ's perfect righteousness. They've been washed clean of all their sins in the cleansing waters of Baptism through faith which grasps the promises of God. They have an alien righteousness. They have a righteousness not their own. They receive this amazing gift through faith. Faith can't be seen. You can see works but you can't see faith. You cannot judge faith by someone's works.

I am a Christian.

How do I know I'm a Christian?

Our Lord says in Mark, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (16:16) I've been baptized and believe in Jesus. Our Lord says in John "that God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (3:16) I'm in the world. I am a Christian.

To determine the assurance of my salvation, I don't look at my works. If you look externally at my works, you'll see that many unbelievers have greater works than I do. Many are more patient with people. Many don't have a temper. Many do more acts of charity. Many are more loving with their kids and spouses. Many listen to more edifying music. The list could really go on and on. If I look at works, I have no assurance that I'm a Christian.

Some look to their works for assurance of salvation. Maybe you kept your temper under control today. Maybe you did charitable deeds this last week. Maybe you showed sacrificial love to your spouse or kids. These, after all, are good things. Your neighbor needs your good works. But is your good work ever good enough? If you take a close look at yourself with the perfect mirror of God's law, you have to come to the same conclusion that Paul does:

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... for I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do

not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”
(Romans 7:15, 18-19)

If we look at our works, we might be tempted to think that we are the foolish virgins in the parable. But notice that all ten virgins have fallen asleep. They have not kept alert for the bridegroom as they should have. Paul’s wailing that we’ve just heard describes Christians who fall asleep waiting for their Lord. We still have the old man pestering us with evil desires. We know this because we still sin. John says “if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” But he immediately follows it with, “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:8-9) We will continue to confess our sin until death puts an end to our old man. And our faithful and just Lord will continue to offer forgiveness, thanks be to God!

The oil in the parable is not works but faith. Faith is just like the oil in a lamp. The lamp cannot produce its own oil. The oil that fills the lamp must come from outside itself. The lamp cannot continue to burn unless it keeps getting filled with oil. Likewise, you cannot produce your own faith. It must come to you from outside yourself. And it must continually keep getting filled.

What is faith?

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”
(Hebrews 11:1)

You are the bride of Christ. You hope for the bridegroom to fulfill His promise to come and take you from this valley of tears unto Himself. He promised that He would pay for your sins. He promised that He would raise Himself from the dead. He promised that He would make you children of Abraham through water and the word through faith alone and not works. He promises that He will come get you and make everything new. He keeps His promises. You have faith in Him; that is, you hope in Him. Peter describes it this way:

“Though you have not seen Him, you love Him. Though you do not now see Him, you believe in Him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” (1 Peter 1:8-9)

The outcome of your faith in Jesus is the salvation of your soul. This faith must continue to be fed. It can be neglected which is why Jesus warns us with this parable. He is coming at a time we don't expect. Just like a lamp must be daily filled with oil, we must have our faith filled daily. Jesus has established means to fill our lamps with faith: Word and Sacraments.

These revolve around two events in your life.

One is the Divine Service. We start the divine service with “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” to remind us of our baptism. God made us His in our baptism. Then we hear Him forgive our sins. He is righteous and just and forgives our sins. We then sing the songs of the church also known as Psalms to remind us what our God has done. And then we glorify God for His great goodness towards us. We then hear His Word and confess the faith which that Word proclaims. We then hear from God the application of His Word to our lives, also known as a

sermon. We respond with thanksgiving and our prayers ascend before Him. We then prepare for the visitation by our Lord in our presence. He comes to us bodily in simple bread and wine. We are dismissed being strengthened in the faith so that our lamps might shine in a dark world. This is the high point of your week where heaven and earth meet and you participate in the heavenly banquet. This feeds and strengthens your faith.

The other event where your lamp is filled is with your daily devotions. There are many ways to do daily devotions, however they certainly must contain the Word of God and prayer. There are many great guides to reading Scripture out there. They can be really simple like the portals of prayer or an elaborate system like the Treasury of Daily Prayer. The insert in the bulletin contains the readings from the Treasury this upcoming week. It doesn't matter which you use as long as you use something focused on God's Word. It's also a good idea to start and end your day with "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and say the Creed and the Lord's Prayer as our Catechism recommends. As the Divine Service is the high point of your week, your daily devotion with prayer is the high point of your day. We are "made holy by the word of God and prayer." (1 Timothy 4:5) Paul is talking about everything created by God which certainly includes you.

The divine service and our daily devotions in the Word of God feed our faith and keep the oil in our lamps. They can be easy to neglect, however. Satan would like you to be distracted by anything that gets you out of church and out of the Word of God. Don't be distracted! Stand firm! It looks like a second shutdown is headed our way. Satan even uses the government to try and shut down the church. According to our Governor the church is not essential. According to God, it is essential. That's where

God bestows His awesome grace upon us in person. Can we miss a few Sundays if we are sick? Certainly, but the oil in our lamp sure gets low. That's why the author of Hebrews warns us "[to not neglect] to meet together, as is the habit of some, but [encourage] one another, and all the more as you see the Day [of Christ's return] drawing nearer." (Hebrews 10:25) Don't be distracted! Stand firm!

You are a Christian.

How do you know?

Look to the promises of God placed upon you in your Baptism.

"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16)

Look to the promise of forgiveness ringing in your ears.

"[Jesus] breathed on [the disciples] and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.'" (John 20:22-23)

Look to the promise of forgiveness placed upon your tongue.

"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

To participate in the body and blood of Christ is to participate in forgiveness! Look to the Word of God where all all the promises of God are yes and amen in Jesus. (2 Corinthians 1:20)

In Jesus' name. Amen.