

The Last Sunday of the Church Year  
Matthew 25:1-13

Last week we heard about “active” faith. Today we hear about “passive” faith. Active faith is the faith that produces good works. Passive faith is the faith that receives grace from God in His good gifts of Word and Sacrament. You must have passive faith before you can have active faith. Or in other words, you must believe something before you act on that belief. It’s fitting, however, that we hear about passive faith today on the last Sunday of the church year because passive faith has the final word in your salvation.

Active faith does things. It’s what James talks about when he says, “But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” (James 2:18) In other words, passive faith doesn’t exist apart from active faith. Active faith is driven by the need we see around us and motivated by our belief in Jesus. It’s informed by the Ten Commandments and is pleasing to God because we do the works in faith. Hebrews 11 is full of a list of heroes in the faith who have come before us and how they lived out their faith. The final judgment we heard about last week will really be an extended version of Hebrews 11, but with all of us. There will be time to tell of the deeds of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets, and even you and me.

But active faith cannot exist without passive faith. James talks about passive faith before he talks about active faith. “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.” (James 1:12) That is to say, blessed is the man who keeps his lamp full with the oil of passive faith so that he withstands trials of all sorts. James also says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.” (James 1:17-18)

That is to say, the oil of God's Word comes down from our Father in heaven and gives us grace upon grace. And God's grace works like the lamp and oil in today's parable. We must keep getting our passive faith replenished.

Active faith does. Passive faith receives. And it keeps receiving until we die. In fact, it must keep on receiving because we keep sinning. If you or I examined ourselves in the harsh light of God's Law, we would see that our active faith is weak and certainly not worthy of forgiveness. All ten virgins fell asleep and not just the five foolish. None of us are able to impress God with our works even though we do know that He is pleased with the meager works we do in faith. So, we need to continue to hear that we are forgiven of all our sin and that we have salvation because of God's grace. That is, in the words of today's parable, we need our lamps to continually be refilled with oil.

And that need is met primarily in the Divine Service. We hear the word of forgiveness from the pastor as from God Himself. We hear the word of life found only in His Scriptures. And we feed upon the body and blood of our Lord for the forgiveness of sins and strengthening of our faith. We echo with the Psalmist, "What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits to me?" (Psalm 116:12) We rightly respond with praise and thanksgiving for the amazing gift of salvation. When you rightly understand the main thrust of the Divine Service, where God is acting upon you, you hesitate to call it "worship." Should we really focus upon our own actions instead of upon God's divine service to us in love? Yet, I'm amazed at how many LCMS websites call the Divine Service "worship" on their websites. I'm working on revamping our website to make it less bogged down and more useful, so I'm looking at lots of examples. And I've been amazed at how many LCMS churches focus on our "worship" instead of God's Divine Service.

And it really is a matter of focus. To many, insistence upon "Divine Service" language instead of "Worship" seems pedantic and a waste of time.

But it actually is important because it reorients your focus on the acts of God. With God's action there is certainty and peace of conscience. With our actions there is uncertainty and a troubling of the conscience.

And I'm not saying that praise and thanksgiving aren't important. How could we not offer praise and thanksgiving in response to the mighty acts of God on our behalf? But you know from personal experience that the feelings associated with our praise and thanksgiving are all over the place. Some weeks your feelings are strong with appreciation for God. Other weeks your feelings are weak and feeble. It is comforting that God is acting in both cases. In the words of today's parable, we have a really poor detector on the oil in our lamps. And emotions are the least reliable indicator of how full we are of God's forgiveness. So, we switch our focus to God's actions. You know that they are outside of yourself and that is a great thing. With God's external acts upon you there is certainty and peace of mind. With God's Word there is certainty and peace. Let's focus on the Word.

Focus on God's Word should be a highlight of our everyday life. Focus is something that's very hard for us. We keep getting trained by our environment to not focus. Television and movies trained us to not pay attention for very long, to not think deeply about anything, and it has killed our imaginations. We let the video do the thinking and imagining for us. This is one of the big reasons why the movie is never better than the book. When you read a book, your imagination is actively involved. When you watch the same thing in video, your imagination is hardly ever involved. And the internet has made it exponentially worse.

We are a people of the book and not a people of the "video." And we are a people who hardly know our own book let alone spend time meditating deeply upon it. All over the place in the book, God tells us to meditate on His Word.

“And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.”  
(Deuteronomy 6:6)

“Blessed is the man [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD, and on His law he meditates day and night.” (Psalm 1:1)

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.” (Psalm 19:14)

“To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth— Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (Proverbs 1:2-7)

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” (Romans 12:2a)

Can we learn to meditate? Can we undo all the damage our technology has caused with regard to meditation and imagination? I believe we can.

I'm going to ask you to do three things every day for me this week. I hesitate to give you a checklist for the week. And not because it's Thanksgiving week. Before I was Lutheran I belonged to a church that gave you a checklist of things to do during the week. It focused on you and what you're doing instead of focusing on Christ. It assumes passive faith, like the lamp never goes out of oil, and focuses only on active faith. Instead of looking to Jesus and what He continues to do for you in Word and Sacrament, you looked inside of yourself and what you were doing. It's a horrible way to live and leads to either pride or despair. There's always the danger of that happening, but I believe what I'm going to ask you to do ultimately focuses on passive faith.

First, I want you to read in the Bible every day, preferably in the morning. You can use the reading suggestions in the bulletin, which come from the Daily Lectionary out of your hymnal; or you can pick a book of the Bible and read a chapter. I'll continue using the Daily Lectionary, but either is fine, just pick one way to do it and stick to it for the rest of the week. Read it aloud to yourself if you are able to. There's something about hearing it read that really helps with understanding and enjoyment.

Second, I want you to immediately think about what you just read. Spend five to ten undistracted minutes meditating on what you just read. The reporter questions of who?, what?, when?, where?, and why? are great questions to apply to the text you just read. Also, how is Jesus in the chapter you just read? is also another great question to ask. Furthermore, how is Law and Gospel present in this text? Spend five minutes on the first day meditating on the text. If that is easy for you extend it to ten minutes. And I have a feeling it will be difficult for all of us to do just five minutes of meditating. And I have a feeling it will be extremely difficult for some of you! That's okay. Repent and repeat the next day!

And I want you to do this with your phone turned off in another room. Yes, this means I want you to read a physical Bible. Studies have shown that if the phone is in the same room with you, even shut off, it provides a distraction for you. Not to mention how distracting it is when it's in your hand! The goal is to build up to ten minutes of distraction free meditation on a chapter of the Bible. Distraction free also means music free.

Third, I want you to pick a fiction book to read during the week. Kid's books are fine. If they are well written, they're good at any age. I'm going to read "The Wind in the Willows" by Kenneth Grahame. Read at least one chapter a day. I want you to read something that you haven't seen on television or a movie. I want you to practice engaging your imagination in what you're reading. I believe it will be easier to practice this with a novel, so it's a great place to start. And then we can transition using it in our Bible reading.

We don't use imagination hardly at all anymore and God wants us to use our it. It's one of the ways we make the Bible ours. When you hear the story of Abraham or Joseph or Samson, images should leap to your mind. Let's practice using it. If you just can't read fiction, go ahead and add Genesis to your reading schedule. The stories of our forefathers should stir your imagination. Again, put your phone somewhere else. There's no reason you have to have it with you at all times. Even if there's an emergency, it can wait ten minutes.

The reason I want you to do this is to help keep your lamp full of oil. First, we must receive the oil from God's good gifts of Word and Sacrament. Second, I believe it helps to reflect on what God has given you. The more you reflect on God's Word and gifts, the more they become yours. So let us be a people who meditate on God's Word. Let us be a people who think deeply on God's Word.

Jesus is coming back. He's coming at a time none of us will expect. Passive faith has the final word! Let us not be caught without oil in our lamps. When the door is shut, it will be shut for good. But entry is free. It only depends on the oil that God so freely and graciously gives us in both Word and Sacrament. Let us continue to receive this oil. And God will continue to bless us and make us His people.

In Jesus' name. Amen.