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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Matthew 25:1-13

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>7</sup>Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup>And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' (Matthew 25:7-8, RSV)

This is a sermon about the long haul. It is built on the observation that that which distinguishes the five wise maidens from the five foolish ones is not so much whether they were prepared, but whether they were prepared *for the long haul*. The foolish ones were akin to the wise ones in that they had their lamps and they had their oil. It is just that they did not have *enough* oil: "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out," they cry. They had oil at first, but now they are running dry.

But alas, this is not possible. It is not possible to borrow oil from others. It is not possible in the parable because the five wise maidens do not have enough extra oil to spare. And it is not possible in reality because each of us is responsible for the state of our own soul. In the moment of crisis, it will not be enough to point to our neighbor and to say, "That one has plenty of faith. Could you not credit some of that excess to me?" No, in the matter of faith, it is not good enough that mother should believe or father or sister or brother should believe. We also should stand on our feet and believe for ourselves. We should walk with Jesus fair and square ourselves, such that we are at his side, and not just Peter, James, John, Mary, and all the saints, but us too!

Let me begin my discussion of this parable by speaking of my sympathy for the five foolish maidens. They started off well in the good fight of faith, and they faded, but I am grateful that at least they started, for in starting, they gave themselves a chance and I am sure they did some good along the way.

Let us note that all ten of the maidens began the good race, though not all finished. They all had their lamps and all had at least some oil — the oil in the reservoir of the lamp. They had no extra flask of oil, but at least they had an initial reasonable supply. None of them were knuckleheads who had lamps but no fuel. It was just that the bridegroom delayed. This delay took *all* of the maidens by surprise, such that "they all slumbered and slept." The dividing line between the foolish and the wise maidens was whether they had enough oil for what turned out to be a long night. They all began the night ready for the return of the Bridegroom, but not all of them endured, not all of them proved ready at the end of what turned out to be a long night.

And why do I speak of the maidens in the parable? Most of all, I am speaking of you and of me. For you see, the Bridegroom has not yet come in his beauty and in his glory *for any of us*. Not yet. For each of us, our Lord's call at the end of the parable remains valid and important:

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (Matthew 25:13, RSV)

Watch! Lest we ourselves prove to be they: the foolish maidens. Lord, spare us from that. Grant us grace that we not fall away from Christ and be found unready when he comes.

The apostle Paul once urged the Corinthians against complacency

<sup>12</sup>Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.(1 Corinthians 10:12, KJV)

But I do not want that for you, nor for me. I do not want to us fall! I do not want us to start off well, but then to fade away in the good fight of faith.

It is important to me that the five foolish maidens should be praised and encouraged on toward wisdom. For one thing, I do not want any of you dear ones who might be giving thought to commencing a walk with Christ, to hold back from that walk from fear that you might not complete it, and thereby be charged with foolishness. No, have no such fear. You are meant, you are built for the Christian path. You might stumble along that path at first, or even after fifty years, but while you walk that path, you are a stronger and better person. The Bridegroom has not yet returned. There is still time to commence your Christian life and to renew that life. There is still time for you.

In the course of a long ministry, I have from time to time encountered Christians who for a while burned brightly with the love of Christ. For a while, they were happy, they were faithful in worship, they carried their faith with them into everyday life, and they were ready for Christ to return to this earth. If he *had* returned during those months or years, those brightly burning Christians would have been found ready for him.

Sorry to say, I do not see them anymore. Maybe they have moved away. Let us pray that they have not moved away from Christ.

Recall the parable of the variety of soils and recall the thorns. My heart goes out to those seeds that fell on the thorny ground:

As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.(Matthew 13:22, NRS)

And so it is that the faith of Christians can cool. They can fade away. They can backslide. The cares of this world lure them away from Christ.

Still, while their faith was strong, our world was better off because of them. No one knows the encouragement they might have given to others in those days. No one knows the souls they might have touched. No one knows the full extent of the good they did on this earth before they became tired and distracted with many things. And no one knows the troubles, the heartaches, and the disappointments in their lives that might have left them discouraged and cooled their faith. Only God knows such things.

The challenge of this morning's parable is that we should not fade away. The challenge is that we should remain true to Jesus even though he should tarry and we should grow old and white-haired. The adventure of our lives is that we should be found ready should Jesus come at the third hour or the sixth hour or even as far off as the eleventh hour.

Here are some suggestions for us to help keep our faith alive for the long haul:

First, do not underestimate the power of lethargy and ill-discipline to rob us of faith, bit by bit. It begins by, say, skipping worship when on vacation. Other plausible causes soon appear, and of course, sometimes we cannot make it to church on Sunday morning

(though maybe we can make it Sunday evening or Saturday evening or even Wednesday evening.) And so, without any firm decision, we might discover about ourselves that we no longer go to church. We no longer hear the reading of the Holy Bible, we no longer lift our voices in hymn or prayer, we no longer receive the Blessed Sacrament. So, that's a first caution: Beware the power of bad habits.

Second, avail yourselves of the means of grace. This is the opposite of the first point. Rather than slipping away from Divine Worship, make it your earnest business to attend and to be part of it.

And so we should attend to the exhortation of St. Paul about the full armor of God. Let me read it for you using the New Revised Standard Version:

<sup>13</sup>Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. <sup>14</sup>Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. <sup>15</sup>As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup>With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup>Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. <sup>18</sup>Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.(Ephesians 6:13-18, NRS)

Third, in your daily life do indeed ponder the question that some high and mighty professors tend to pooh pooh. I mean, ponder the question in your life, What would Jesus do? I do not mean, what would Jesus do as the omnipotent, omniscient, King of the Universe? No, I mean, what would Jesus do if he felt your weaknesses, your stress, and your temptation? Then, try to do what Jesus would do. This requires a kind of holy imagination in which we extrapolate from the stories of Jesus in the Bible to his life in this modern, perplexing world, but try your hand at such holy imagination.

Fourth, endure the wintry seasons of life with a hope that will not fail of springtime.

Earlier in this sermon I quoted St. Paul's caution about taking thought lest he or she who stands should nonetheless fall. But now let me tell you the rest of the story. Right after that solemn warning, St. Paul rushes on to this mighty word of encouragement:

<sup>13</sup>There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:13, KJV)

This might be a happy season in your life. I hope it is. But if not, I want you to believe and to trust that there are better days ahead. If I did not believe in Jesus, I could make no such promise. But I do believe in him, in his love and in power to save. So, hang in there. Endure any downhearted times, and look forward to the good season to come.

And fifth, seek the company of Christian friends, for we might well find strength for our faith through the mutual conversation and consolation of our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

It has been two thousand years now that the Church has been waiting for Jesus to come again in power and glory. For two thousand years now, we have been echoing the final cry recorded in the book of Revelation and so the final cry of the Bible:

“Surely I am coming soon.” [says Jesus, to which the Church cries] Amen.  
Come, Lord Jesus!(Revelation 22:20, RSV)

Come, Lord Jesus. A world that has grown weary in a way and a bit frightened cries out to you to come, and to come quickly.

None of us knows when our Lord actually will come, but I do know these things: We are closer to his return than ever before, this day is worthy of being lived as the day of our Lord’s return, and the Bridegroom comes to us now in this Blessed Sacrament we are about to share. For we are the maidens in Christ, the Bridegroom comes to us in this Sacrament, and He beckons to us to join the feast. Let us not decline the feast of a life lived in the name of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.