

Being Wise or Foolish
Matthew 25:1-13

Having grown up just outside New York City, John barely knew a cow from an ear of corn. Until, he married a small town Ohio girl. At the time he was at the seminary, studying for the Holy Ministry, and he had the opportunity to preach at a small church in a rural community. The day of his first sermon, John tried very hard to fit in – maybe too hard. With his wife sitting proudly in the first pew, he began with these words, *“I never saw a cow until I met my wife.”*

That was not exactly the wisest thing to say. In fact, it was a pretty foolish remark, because I don’t think John was prepared for the consequences to come. In a strange way, that’s a good reminder for our Christian lives – a reminder to be wise instead of foolish – a reminder that Judgment Day is coming, when Jesus will return to this earth to raise the dead, judge all nations and bring His people Home. And we need to be prepared for that at all times.

Such was the thought behind our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus’ parable of the ten virgins waiting for the wedding feast. Now the reason that Jesus likens the Kingdom of Heaven to a Wedding Feast is because you and I, the members of the Church, are His bride. And we are waiting for Jesus, our Groom, to come and take us home to the honeymoon of heaven. You see, the Jewish custom at the time of Christ was that there was a period of separation for the Bride and Groom between the time of engagement and the Wedding day. At the engagement ceremony they made their promise and pledge of faithfulness to one another. They did this by giving gifts to each other, usually their most prized possession. By the way, this is where our concept of the engagement ring comes from. But afterwards they would part company from one

another until the Wedding Day, when the groom would return to claim his bride and take her to his home, where they would consummate their union.

Dear friends, that is a beautiful picture of the union between Christ and His bride, the Church. You might say that our Baptism is our engagement day. At Baptism Jesus made His promise and pledge to be faithful to us forever, to faithfully love and protect and save us. And as a sign of His promise, He gave us something much more valuable than a diamond engagement ring. He gave us His holy precious blood, which washes away the stain of sin. The blood of Jesus blots out our sinful past and brings us near to the throne of God. The blood of Jesus heals our wounds and mends our broken hearts. The blood of Jesus is a cleansing stream that carries all our guilty burdens away. That is what Jesus gave us in the waters of Baptism when He betrothed Himself to us and made us His holy bride. And we ourselves made our betrothal pledge to Him at our Confirmation, when by the power of the Holy Spirit we made our promise to be faithful to Him unto death. That's what it means to be engaged to Jesus.

However, our union with Him has not yet been consummated. And it won't be until we get to heaven. Only then will we be perfectly sinless, perfectly happy and at peace, perfectly without pain or sorrow or conflict. Until then we must wait. We must wait for our bridegroom to come and take us to His home in heaven. The question is: how are we waiting? Or more to the point, how are we conducting ourselves while we wait – are we being wise or foolish?

To address that question, Jesus told the parable of the ten young virgins waiting for the wedding feast. We would call them the Bridesmaids, waiting for the groom to come and take their friend, the bride to his home. Jesus says that five of the virgins were foolish and five were wise. The five foolish virgins were so caught up with earthly cares that they forgot to get enough oil for their lamps. According to Bible scholars, these lamps were actually torches, with oil-drenched rags attached to the top and lit on

fire. They required large amounts of oil to burn brightly and had to be trimmed every fifteen minutes, by cutting off the charred ends and adding extra oil. Unfortunately, the groom took a long time in coming and the five foolish virgins weren't prepared for that. Consequently, when the groom finally arrived the foolish virgins were caught off guard. They had no extra oil to relight their lamps. They quickly tried to remedy the error, by running out to buy more oil. But it was too late. The door to the banquet hall was locked behind them and they were shut out!

My friends, that describes our own situation perfectly. Martin Luther used to say that we are *simul iustus et peccator*, 'at the same time saint and sinner;' or at the same time wise and foolish. At our Baptism we were given a new nature. But we also have an old nature that still clings to us. For that reason, like the foolish virgins, at times we become too preoccupied with earthly cares. For instance, we're too busy with work to take time out to read and study the Scriptures. We're too wrapped up in television or other activities to spend time with Jesus in prayer and meditation on His Word. We're too intent on making our plans and going our own way to listen for God's will in our lives. We're too committed to other projects to serve in the church. We're too interested in going other places than in coming to Bible class. In these and many other ways our sinful nature gets the best of us and we wind up acting like the foolish virgins.

It's kind of like the new employee, who called the help desk to complain that there was something wrong with the password they had been given. *"The problem is that whenever I type the password, it just shows stars."* The technician explained: *"Those asterisks are there to protect you, so if someone were standing behind you, they wouldn't be able to read your password."* "Yeah," the employee replied, *"but they show up even when there isn't anyone standing behind me."*

Talk about the height of foolishness. Well, that is what sin is like. It is utter foolishness. As a matter of fact, it blinds us so that we cannot even see our sinful folly. We cannot see how far we have strayed away from God. That's part of the reason why the women in our text are referred to as virgins – it's a symbol of purity in life and doctrine, of faithfulness of Jesus all our dangers. But the danger is that we can fall away from our faith. You know, the key difference between the wise and foolish virgins was the amount of oil. The wise virgins had oil not only at the beginning and middle of their wait. They also had oil at the end of their wait. Now in Scripture oil is often used as a symbol for the Holy Spirit and His work of strengthening our faith. You see, it's important to have faith not just at the beginning and middle of life, but especially at the very end. And the only way to hold onto our faith is by availing ourselves of the tools of the Holy Spirit, namely, the Word and the Sacraments. In other words, the only way to overcome the foolishness of our sin is with the wisdom of God's forgiveness and salvation, which He pours out in the Means of Grace.

It's interesting to note that the word *foolish* in our text actually refers to bread that has gone stale and lost its flavor. Certainly that is what unconfessed sin does to our soul. It makes our spiritual life go stale and can even cause us to lose our faith. That's why it's so important that we daily renew our faith. That's what Jesus was getting at, when He encouraged us to constantly keep watch. We need to renew our betrothal to Jesus by being in the Word and Sacraments, daily remembering our Baptism, by confessing our sins to Him, repenting of them in humility and sorrow, and then receiving His free forgiveness; by weekly coming to God's House for worship and Bible study, so that we can receive pardon and absolution for all our offenses. And we have this comforting assurance, that when we come to Jesus in repentance and faith, He will not slam the door in our face. He will not turn His back on us. Instead, He will welcome us with open arms and lovingly accept us into His favor. After all, that's why

He died on the cross for you and me – to erase all our misdeeds and to clothe us with the pure white wedding gown of His righteousness to cover up all our sins and to make us beautiful and spotless in His sight, to present us before the Father as His precious Bride. It's the God News that, although the foolish our locked out, those who are wise by the gift of faith in Jesus Christ, are shut up securely inside the Banquet Hall of Heaven, where sin, death and hell cannot even touch or harm us anymore!

Centuries ago Urthazanes, a Persian Christian who had fallen away from the faith, saw Simeon, the bishop of his church being led to out to be executed for his faith. Urthazanes saluted his teacher as he passed by, but Simeon frowned back. Urthazane's heart was broken. He said to himself, *"Ah! how shall I appear before the great God of heaven, whom I have denied, when Simeon, but a man will not endure to look upon me? If he frown, how will God behold me when I stand before His tribunal!"* As a result, Urthazanes repented of his sin, returned to his faith and later died as a martyr. In other words, Urthazanes was given a second chance.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, how good it is to know that our gracious God is the God of the second chance, the third chance and even more. On this side of heaven He gives us countless opportunities to repent and receive His forgiveness. It's true that once Judgment Day comes it will be too late. Then there will be no second chance. But right now the Holy Spirit is working continually to return us to Him. And He promises us that when we do return to Him in repentance and faith, we will not receive the frown of His anger and judgment, for Jesus took that all away on the cross. Instead we will receive the smile of His love and forgiveness. That's what the Holy Spirit offers us over and over again in the Word and the Sacraments. And that's why we constantly need to replenish our oil supply by making use of the Means of Grace, so that we are prepared for Jesus' coming. May God help us to do so, for then we will truly be wise instead of foolish. Amen.