OSLC Sermon 11 12 17
Amos 5:18-24, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25:1-13

Grace to you and peace…

I confess that I'm grabbing at straws this week. I'm wrestling these texts every which way trying to claim a Gospel word for us today.

For example, the very first verse of the parable in Matthew yields a translation question. "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like…" is the translation we have before us. Because the Greek verbs are future passive (grabbing for obscure linguistic straws), it could also read, "Then the kingdom of heaven may be likened to…" Subtle, yes. But perhaps, just maybe, it's an opportunity for Jesus to put some distance between his own view of heaven and this parable as he tells it. Yeah. It might be a stretch. But it's possible.

Again, the parable makes a contrast between wisdom and foolishness, reminiscent of the Wisdom literature found in Proverbs. Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly are stock characters in that genre – guiding us to think about what yields life and what guides us toward destruction. Maybe that's a way of avoiding the harsh judgment Matthew's Jesus declares so unequivocally.

What is it about this parable that makes 21st century progressive Lutherans so…uncomfortable? In my own discomfort and questions, I invite you to wrestle with me as we hold fast to this parable until it yields a blessing.

We are nearing the end of Matthew's gospel (is it disrespectful to thank God for that?) The stakes grow higher and higher as Jesus draws closer to his execution at the hands of the Jewish leaders

and the Roman Empire. This One who has healed the sick, fed the multitude, welcomed the outcast, and cast out demons – all life-giving acts of liberation and love – is about to be crucified as a common criminal for blaspheme and for disrupting the Pax Romana. The ragged edge of urgency is clearly showing as we encounter a collection of parables over these next few weeks.

The parable tells of 10 bridesmaids awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom. All 10 women have been invited to the celebration. These are insiders – those who have a relationship with the wedding party, and even a role to play in the festivities. Their job – their responsibility – is to light the way for the procession of the bridegroom as he goes to collect the bride from her home. It is a role of some ritual importance. These invited guests are not simply decorative.

Five of these attendants were foolish, and five were wise. We are sensitive these days to labeling and name calling, so these distinctions disturb us. But honestly, the translation is gentle. The foolish, in this case, literally means *morons*. The wise ones are at least “prudent” or “thoughtful.” Five of them, we are told, simply grabbed their lamps and set out to wait. The other five thought about their responsibilities and took not just their lamps, but also flasks of extra oil.

The anticipation has begun, but the bridegroom is delayed. All of the attendants grow drowsy and fall asleep – wise and foolish together. Then comes the cry, “Behold! Here is the bridegroom” It’s show time, the moment they’ve awaited, the moment for which they were called. Five of them are not prepared.

Every time we read this parable someone rightly asks, “Why didn’t the wise bridesmaids simply share what they had?” Isn’t that the Christian thing to do?

We are quick to judge the seemingly selfish attendants for their lack of generosity. But really, whose problem is it? Five took their invitation and their responsibility seriously and prepared. Five did not. Would it really have been better if all ten of the lamps had burned out because they shared the oil they had? Would it honor the anticipated bridegroom if there had been no light at all for this joyous occasion?

I’m squirming in discomfort as I even suggest that perhaps the wise bridesmaids were truly right in their priorities.

The moronic attendants fell short in so many ways. Though they had accepted the invitation both to celebrate and to serve, they were not prepared when the moment came. What’s more, rather than face the bridegroom by the light of the five remaining lamps and admit their mistake, they rushed away from the main event – to cover their mistake? After belatedly fulfilling their responsibilities they seek to enter the banquet on their own terms: “we’re ready now, please let us in.”

As Lutherans who have been raised on the truth that we do not earn salvation by our own good works, we can hardly bear the thought that the bridegroom would not recognize those invited to share in the great celebration. How could he turn them away?!

Friends, we feel justified in judging the bridegroom – rejecting him, even; but we refuse to allow the bridegroom to make judgments of his own. I say with sincere caution and trepidation, is it really ours to judge the Lord of the banquet?

The Gospel message is that in Christ God extends an open invitation to the marriage feast that has no end. All are welcomed into God loving embrace. Is it unreasonable for God to ask that we live as though we trust in that generous invitation?

“Keep awake therefore,” Jesus says, “for you know neither the day nor the hour.” What is it, exactly for which we are to be prepared?

***

Sandy Aslaksen and I, along with the rest of our staff, have been in sober conversation about the need for “Active Shooter Training” for the church and the English Learning Center. Yet another mass shooting, this time in a church while the faithful were at prayer, reminds us of our responsibility to prepare for the worst; to do what we can to protect the people we are called to serve.

It’s a horrible thought. I don’t want to anticipate – to prepare for – the eventuality that the obscene violence we are witnessing in our country might actually come to pass here in our own building; in our own sanctuary. Honestly, I’d prefer to live in denial.

But the wisdom of the world insists that such preparation is the prudent thing to do.

The wisdom of the world urges all kinds of preparation that we assume are prudent and responsible.

Insurance, for one. We insure our homes in case fire or theft or some other catastrophe destroys our dwelling and our security. We not only insure our property for our own benefit, but also at the requirement of our mortgage holders, who insist on protecting against their own potential financial loss.

We insure our cars against unforeseen accidents that might harm lives and property, due to our own errors or the potential mistakes of unknown others.

We carry health insurance, to prepare for the possibility of disease or accidents that may require massive medical treatment at costs beyond our ability to pay.

The irony of this kind of “preparation” is that the very companies we pay for protection when we need it are motivated by their profit interests to pay as little as possible against any claims submitted.

And then there’s retirement. Current wisdom tells us that we are not to be a burden on anyone when our income-producing lives are over. Responsible people plan how much money they will need to live on after retirement…without knowing how long that might be. We know that we must be prepared, so we do the right thing (if we have the means to do so in the first place) and put money aside while we can, trusting the market with our investments and hoping those managing the funds will be responsible on our behalf.

It’s wise, we are told, to be prepared. To keep ourselves safe. To anticipate every threat and provide for every possibility. This kind of preparedness, motivated by fear, leads people to build walls and deport people who look different from them. To insist on more laws to control the bad guys or buy more guns to protect ourselves. Or at least have a plan for when the worst comes to pass.

Our preparations are informed by the future we anticipate – by what we are looking forward to.

Each of the texts for today speak to what it looks like to be prepared for the ultimate future – for the day when life as we know it comes to an end and all things are gathered into God. Biblical shorthand calls this “the Day of the Lord.”

While Matthew’s Gospel sounds harsh, even threatening, to our ears it is because of his urgency to press the importance of living into God’s reign while we have breath. This is the same writer who insists that we are blessed when we are poor in spirit, when we mourn, when we hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is the same Gospel that tells us that the Good Shepherd will leave the 99 to seek and to save the one that is lost. In Matthew’s Gospel we learn that Jesus’ disciples were sent out to proclaim the good news that the reign of heaven is close at hand; to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons.

This Gospel tells us that we are the light of the world! This world is in such urgent need of light and love and truth and generosity. We are the attendants of the bridegroom – those with the responsibility and the privilege of shining our light that all might see their way to God’s abundant and inclusive banquet. Everyone is invited.

The world tells us that it is wise to prepare for the worst. God insists that it is wiser by far to prepare for the very best. So let your light shine before others, and let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

“Keep awake,” Jesus says, “for you know neither the day nor the hour.”Perhaps every day is the day of the Lord. Amen.