

November 12

Last Sunday we entered into the last few weeks of the Christian liturgical year during which we focus on the end result of all this movement toward God's ultimate reign, the new heaven and new earth promised in John's revelation. From recognizing the great cloud of witnesses to seeing that one day Jesus will reign at the right hand of God as Christ the King, we take time to think of and learn about and find hope once again both now and forever.

But to take hold of that promised future, there are some realities to be lived today. We must participate in our own salvation. Jesus did all the dying, paid all the price, but we must participate as those who receive and allow the Spirit to come into our hearts and lives and rearrange some things so that our hearts, minds, and lives look like a little version of Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Hear now one of the ways that Jesus teaches his disciples about movement toward God's eternal kingdom.

Matthew 25:1-13

*"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten young bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the groom.<sup>2</sup> Now five of them were wise, and the other five were foolish.<sup>3</sup> The foolish ones took their lamps but didn't bring oil for them.<sup>4</sup> But the wise ones took their lamps and also brought containers of oil.*

*<sup>5</sup> "When the groom was late in coming, they all became drowsy and went to sleep.<sup>6</sup> But at midnight there was a cry, 'Look, the groom! Come out to meet him.'*

*<sup>7</sup> "Then all those bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps.<sup>8</sup> But the foolish bridesmaids said to the wise ones, 'Give us some of your oil, because our lamps have gone out.'*

*<sup>9</sup> "But the wise bridesmaids replied, 'No, because if we share with you, there won't be enough for our lamps and yours. We have a better idea. You go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'<sup>10</sup> But while they were gone to buy oil, the groom came. Those who were ready went with him into the wedding. Then the door was shut.*

*<sup>11</sup> "Later the other bridesmaids came and said, 'Lord, lord, open the door for us.'*

*<sup>12</sup> "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'*

*<sup>13</sup> "Therefore, keep alert, because you don't know the day or the hour.*

The big question here is how to be prepared for Jesus to come any day when he has delayed over 2,000 years from when he was expected already. There is a 'use by' date on the world as it is and while we do not know the day nor the hour, there is this encouragement, this wisdom to live our lives always ready for Jesus to come back.

When faced with the notion of readiness and the apparent selfishness of the wise ladies who brought lamps and oil, we need to ask what Jesus is trying to help us understand. What I see after some time and study, is that the ladies who don't share the oil are not acting in selfishness in this case. It's a metaphor. And what I hear the Spirit whisper is that what they have been wise to hold onto is not something that they *can* share.

What it means is this – the oil in the lamp isn't oil – it is a relationship with Jesus that you and I can have through the Holy Spirit and in the practices of love and wisdom that I cannot give to others no matter how much I'd like to.

There's a song I sang as a child that comes to mind. I don't know if you know it, but it goes: *"Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burnin', burnin', burnin'; Give me oil in my lamp I pray, Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burnin', burnin', burnin'; Keep me burnin' til the break of day!"*

This feels like a prayer as I bring it from the recesses of my childhood memories and into my life at this moment. It's asking for sustaining until the morning, for sustaining until the Lord comes. This articulates a desire from me to God, that I be found ready for Jesus.

I cannot give my husband or children a portion of my own salvation. We cannot give someone who doesn't know Christ our own knowledge of Christ – some information, yes, but knowledge, no. We can point the way, we can shine the light, we can be salt and yeast, and we can lead a horse to water, but we cannot make it drink.

To be prepared for Christ to return – or for our days on earth to end – is to be readied each and every day. It is to live in grace and in preparation for spending eternity in the presence of God. It means taking seriously our prayer for it to be on earth as it is in heaven. It means faith and trust and hope that leads to peace and gentleness and love.

But there are two primary ways I see folks approach readiness to be with the Lord.

As Jesus tells us to be ready, some folks think about a grace-based, livable plan of preparedness and others tend toward a fear based paranoia.

In the way I am using these terms I mean that those who are prepared are equipped by the Holy Spirit to love and be loved. They are going on toward perfection in love and living so far as it is within their control in peace with everyone. These are characteristics of eternity that we are taught from scripture and to enact them and pursue them is to be preparing to enter into the presence of God with rejoicing.

And as I talk about a paranoid approach what I mean is that some folks try to be ready for Jesus not by living into grace and mercy offered through Jesus, but by keeping a bunch of rules that make us feel safe and as if we are pleasing God. The paranoid approach to readiness is motivated by fear rather than forgiveness and it comes across as so often harsh rather than helpful. And the double bummer is that the harshness that comes across to others is first felt as harshness to the one living in fear-bound rigidity.

I don't know how many of us here listen to some country music but I do and one of my favorite artists is Tim McGraw. He has a song from a number of years ago that beautifully captures how a person of God might choose to live if we had the chance to get our priorities in alignment with God's priorities. I know it's not a Christian song and I am possibly reading more into it than was intended, but I'd still like to share the lyrics as story, as testimony and as encouragement forward in our own lives.

The song is titled, *"Live Like You Were Dying"*

*He said "I was in my early forties With a lot of life before me*

*And a moment came that stopped me on a dime.*

*I spent most of the next days Looking at the x-rays*

*Talkin' 'bout the options And talkin' 'bout sweet time"*

*I asked him "When it sank in That this might really be the real end*

*How's it hit you When you get that kind of news? Man, what'd you do?"*

*He said "I went skydiving, I went Rocky Mountain climbing*

*I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fumanchu*

*And I loved deeper, And I spoke sweeter, And I gave forgiveness I'd been denying"*

*And he said "Someday I hope you get the chance, To live like you were dying"*

*He said "I was finally the husband, That most of the time I wasn't*

*And I became a friend a friend would like to have, And all of a sudden going fishin'*

*Wasn't such an imposition, And I went three times that year I lost my dad*

*I finally read the Good Book, and I took a good, long, hard look*

*At what I'd do if I could do it all again*

*And then I went skydiving, I went Rocky Mountain climbing, I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fumanchu, And I loved deeper, And I spoke sweeter, And I gave forgiveness I'd been denying"*

*And he said "Someday I hope you get the chance, To live like you were dying  
Like tomorrow was a gift, And you've got eternity, To think about  
What you'd do with it, What could you do with it, What did I do with it?  
What would I do with it?"*

What are we doing with it? The truth is that we are all dying one of these days and this is my one life and your one life, and if we are going to honor God by living these days ready, then the oil in our lamp is love. The oil in our lamp is grace. The oil in our lamp is forgiveness. The oil in our lamp is faith, and hope.

When it registers at a deep level that this is our only offering to God, this one life that we live, the moments and the days, then we can live like we're dying. We can live like there is real freedom in Christ. In our communion liturgy there is a beautiful moment that we confess our sin so that we can be freed for joyful obedience.

In our baptisms we celebrate that we die and rise with Christ. Baptized people are people of new and abundant life. In John 10:10 we hear Jesus say, *"<sup>10</sup> The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest."*

Fear is a thief. Being paranoid means that we live with rigid rules because we're afraid that if we mess up too bad or break the wrong rules or too many rules, then we have to forfeit our joy, our grace, and our salvation. I don't think we have to give in to fear.

So whether you want to just shout to God, "Give me oil in my lamp. Keep me burnin burnin burnin" or you want to "Love deeper, speak sweeter, and give forgiveness you've been denying" I hope that we all hear the encouragement of Jesus to live ready for him in a relationship that delights in the Lord, and bears the fruit of the Spirit in love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law!

The oil in our lamp that keeps us ready is the fuel of the Holy Spirit. There's enough for everyone, but it comes to each of us directly from God.

I know this isn't the first time I've said most of this. And it isn't the last time I'll say it either, because there's really only one sermon I ever preach and it's the power of God's love through Jesus' birth, death, resurrection, and the ongoing gift of the Holy Spirit. And I don't repeat myself because we don't know the story, but because when the world tries to tell a different story – a story of fear, a story of scarcity, a story of hatred,

a story of violence, a story of self-centered living, - when the world tries to overwrite God's story, we have to be a people who remember.

To be ready for Jesus is to know the old, old story, how a Savior came from glory. How he gave his life on Calvary, to save a wretch like me. I heard about his groaning, of His precious blood's atoning. Because then I repented of my sin and won the victory.

So, today, if when we walk out of here we hear another news story about another mass shooting, if we read another headline about a natural disaster wreaking havoc, if we talk to a family member and find out their life is falling apart, if we walk out of here and the devil tries to tell a story other than God's faithful love, we will be able to remind ourselves of the truth we know in Jesus.