

Sermon – Matthew 25:1-13
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
23 Pentecost – Year A
12 November 2017

“Be Prepared!”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Earlier this week, I entered our seventh-grade classroom to teach their Religion class and stumbled upon a game of “two truths and a lie,” a get-to-know-you game in which you offer three statements about yourself, one of them being, of course, a lie. It’s the job of everyone else to try to guess what’s true and what isn’t. They urged me to play, so I said, “My name’s Pastor Lyle. I lived in Scotland for a year. I’m an Eagle Scout. And I’m travelling to Argentina next summer.” Surprisingly, to me at any rate, the near-unanimous guess was that I wasn’t really an Eagle Scout, which is the highest rank a Boy Scout can achieve. I shared this story with one of my pastoral colleagues, and the response was the same: the pastor in question said, well, I hadn’t heard about a trip to Argentina, but there’s no way I would guessed you were really an Eagle Scout. Which leaves me wondering: What is it about me that screams there’s no way I’m an Eagle Scout? Don’t I look woodsy, like I could save a swimmer from drowning and then tie dozens of different knots, hitches, and bends? Or maybe they all thought about my propensity for doing things at the last minute and thought, “there’s no way he lives by the Scout motto, Be Prepared!” Well, surprise. I am an Eagle Scout and I don’t currently have plans to go to Argentina, but if you want to take me there, I promise to set up the tents and tend the fire.
2. Even an Eagle Scout, however, might have a hard time with Jesus’ parable today. It’s a call to constant readiness and over-preparation, and if not read

carefully it can leave us despondent, for who can ever be *that* ready? Jesus tells a parable of the future, not of the Kingdom of God as it is now but as it will be when he, the bridegroom, returns. Ten bridegrooms have gone out to meet him, and on the surface there seems to be little difference among them. All take lamps, trimmed and filled with oil. All fall asleep when the bridegroom is inexplicably delayed. But at midnight comes the cry: "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" And here, in this moment of crisis, the difference between the wise and the foolish emerges. All ten have lamps with wicks flickering out, but five have brought extra oil while five failed to be prepared for the unexpected. The five foolish bridesmaids rush out to buy oil – where, I don't know, as it's hard to imagine any 24-hour oil supply stores in the Ancient Near East – and by the time they get to the party the door is slammed in their faces. "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." For their foolishness, their under-preparedness, they are left out of the party. And the implication is that such will happen to us if we aren't ready, no matter how long Jesus dillydallies in his returning. Keep watch, Jesus tell us. Be prepared, at all times, for any possibility.

3. The parable asks more questions than it answers: How do we tell the difference between the wise and the foolish? What is the oil we are called to have with us? Can we ever be fully prepared? And, this is where despondency creeps in, will Jesus leave us locked out of the banquet? Let's start with the oil, with faith in the bridegroom – and in his arrival – as the key. The foolish bridesmaids, after all, had enough oil to be ready for him if he showed up on *their* schedule, but not enough to trust that he would arrive even if delayed. We are called to the faith of the wise bridesmaids, ready for Jesus whenever he appears – both in his final coming and in his appearances in our lives here and now. And what does that faith look like? It looks like the faith of the Beatitudes, in which we are called to constant peacemaking and continual hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Not just when it suits us, but as a way of life. It looks like the faith of the sheep, not the goats, of the parable

- that follows shortly after this one, faith that makes itself manifest in works of justice and service even unto the least of these. Not when it's convenient, but as a way of life.
4. Here we see the connection between Jesus' preaching and the words of the Old Testament prophets. Faith is not simply carrying out our festivals and making offerings. God takes no delight in such things if they are not accompanied by justice rolling down like waters and righteousness bursting forth like an ever-flowing stream. Or, as Amos might say if he were a prophet today, thoughts and prayers are wonderful in the wake of a tragedy but useless if they don't spur us to faithful, loving action in some tangible form. As Bishop Wayne Miller said at the joint Lutheran and Roman Catholic worship service on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, "We may not be saved by our works, but we are known by them." Or St. James, who puts it bluntly: "Faith without works is dead."
 5. We are called to lives of service, joining in with God's work of creating a world where justice, peace, and righteousness thrive and all people flourish. That, frankly, is a proposition with which it is easy to agree but incredibly difficult to live out, day after day and into the long watches of the night. So we hear this parable in two ways: First, as a call to faithful living and, second, as a trap sprung by Jesus shortly before his crucifixion, a trap that shows us that he is the only way out. It is both at the same time, for in spite of God's call to live out our faith, we will fail, falter, and fall asleep. In these moments, as in every moment, we look to Christ and him crucified, and remember that we are saved. Can we ever be truly prepared? Yes, for it is finally not up to us to get ready. Our old, unready selves have been crucified with Jesus and we, washed in waters of grace and dressed in new robes, are made ready by God's grace to enter into the fullness of the Kingdom. And this, we remember, *this* faith in the grace of God that blots away all of the moments in which we failed to be prepared, does not let us off the hook from the call to holy living.

No, the grace of God and our gratitude to Jesus drive us more deeply into the work of the gospel.

6. And what of the bridegroom shutting out foolish bridesmaids, telling them he does not know them? Well, note what he doesn't say. He doesn't say, "I don't love you," or, "I didn't invite you." No, in their failure to hold faithful to his invitation, they are simply unknowable, for there is no identity apart from the one given to us by Jesus. It is not for us to try to figure out on this side of things who's in and who isn't. That, finally, is up to God. We live by grace, trusting in the promises of Christ and doing, imperfectly but faithfully, the work of God in the world. And should despondency arise, remember what we're waiting for. To quote, at a bit of length, the inimitable Robert Farrar Capon: "'Watch therefore,' Jesus says at the end of the parable, 'for you know neither the day nor the hour.' When all is said and done – when we have scared ourselves silly with the now-or-never urgency of faith and the once-and-always finality of judgment – we need to take a deep breath and let it out with a laugh. Because what we are watching for is a party. And that party is not just down the street making up its mind when to come to us. It is already in our basement, banging on our steam pipes, and laughing its ways up our cellar stairs. The unknown day and hour of its finally bursting into the kitchen and roistering its way through the whole house is not dreadful; it is all part of the divine lark of grace. God is not our mother-in-law, coming to see whether her wedding-present china has been chipped. He is a funny Old Uncle with a salami under one arm and a bottle of wine under the other. We do indeed need to watch for him; but only because it would be a pity to miss all the fun." So, with my apologies to mothers-in-law who get a bad rap, Father Capon is right on the money. The party is beginning, a celebration shown forth in works of love and in faith that clings to Christ alone. You may not feel ready, but God has everything prepared. Trim your lamps and come on in. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.