

24th Sunday after Pentecost

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Texts: Psalm 90; 1 Thessalonians 4: 13–18; Matthew 25: 1–13

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I hope Cher, in her song 'Believe', asks us "Do you believe in life after love", we are led to think of the heartbreaks that make us believe our world falling apart in front of our eyes. Part of the song's popularity, beyond its repetitive melody that seems to get stuck in my head, is the fact that we share a sense of doom after losing a connection with someone that forms part of our life. Whether it be death, heartbreak, or a friend that went down a different path than your own it's a universal emotion to feel we are missing an **essential aspect of life** when love gets taken away us,

Nevertheless, I'm here today to tell a different story, flipping Cher's question entirely on its head. Instead of asking "Do you believe in life after love", we are promised by Christ that if we believe, there is love after life. That with the resurrection, death is not the final answer, and there is no need to doubt our lives because they are secure in our relationship with God. As Psalm 90 verse 1 states: "Lord, you have been our dwelling-place[a] in all generations." In other words, we are secure in God, before and after our lives.

In the same way, in our weekly discussions at 21theo, we've talked about deriving our self-worth not from the external, what society values of us, but from our inherent self-worth as God's creation. By maintaining God's love for us, and our love for God, as the base of our identities. Whether it's from scripture or your student minister, the message is still the same: God's love is eternal even when everything seems to fall apart.

Furthermore, it is no surprise that in today's gospel, Jesus uses the metaphor of the wedding day. A wedding first requires a relationship between two faithful parties longing to be with one another, and in the parable of the ten bridesmaids, shows us the anticipation of the reunion between the faithful bridesmaids (us) and the long-awaited groom, in this case Jesus Christ. Here, we are all invited to a grand celebration of Christ's return, but a few questions are standing after the reading:

- How do we interpret Christ's return as something relevant to our lives today?
- What is the difference between the wise and the foolish bridesmaids?
- What does it mean to go out and pay for oil in the marketplace?

Firstly, when we think of Christ's return, we usually imagine prophetic and revelatory visions of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, or 2012 style panic and fear, the rapture...I could go on about how society portrays it today, but I think these conceptions of Christ's return give the wrong idea about today's parable. Think about it, we've lost touch with expecting Christ after two millennia of waiting. A lot of things of things have changed since then, but then again, the purpose of any sermon is to remind us how God's word still applies today.

This is where we can turn to Thessalonians chapter 4 to better understand the ideas of the last day. Verse 13 the apostle Paul writes, “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope”. Here again, the message is that there is no doubt about life after death. Where in that doubt, there is only hopelessness. It’s important to understand the context of hopelessness that Paul speaks of. At this point in the Church’s history, the Church in Thessalonica is oppressed and marginalized in the Roman empire. Persecuted by the state and cast off by their neighbors, their world only seems to offer anguish; however, the anticipation of Christ’s return offers a new narrative, promising a better life in his presence. That’s why in verse 18 Paul asks the church to encourage the others in the Church with the message of Christ’s return, that a new beginning, not the end, is nigh.

The Thessalonians’ current life of misery is given a second chance in Christ’s return, in the hope of life after death but in the present day does this message have the same weight? I mean two thousand years have passed, and we’ve stopped waiting. It feels like we have the opposite problem as the Thessalonians. We have so much in life that we get caught up in life. Despite all the stress of modern life, we have things pretty good, at the press of a button, we can get a butterburger and a shake delivered to our doorstep for crying out loud. All in all, with the rich and plentiful lives we have, Death is something we fear, even with the promise of eternal life.

So how do we understand the bridesmaids wait for the bridegroom with this new meaning of Christ’s return. This is where returning to Psalm 90, a psalm commonly used at funerals, will help us understand Jesus’ parable. Verse 12 states: “So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.” After an honest account of God’s power and might, and our own weakness, we are told the path to wisdom, knowing our circumstances, is to value each day we have on this earth. In this sense, I see Psalm 90 telling us not to count the days we have left but rather make today and every day count.

It’s easier said than done to do this, however. From midterms and final paper deadlines to job and grad school applications, there always seems to be an anxiety about the future that calls us away from living out the present. Although at its best, this stress keeps us organized and aware of our responsibilities, it can also leave us less prepared for the very due dates we’re working towards, as we spend more time thinking about what we need to do rather than actually doing it. It’s that classic question of ‘are we there yet’, obsessing over the time it will take to arrive, but in the fashion of a cheesy Dad during a long road trip, Jesus tells us in Matthew 25: 13 “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” If this was a road trip, Jesus’ answer would **provide me no satisfaction**; however, **the goal of this parable is not leave us comfortable but to encourage us to stay prepared for Christ in this life by growing spiritually each day.**

To unpack what this means, I’ll draw an example from my own life: learning languages. Over the course of my 4 years in college, I’ve gone from being conversational in only one language, English, to speaking in three, adding Spanish and Arabic. During my journey, I would go on the language learning subreddit, looking for advice and tips. There, would come across the same structure of question. In how many months or years can I become fluent in X language? Or how long will it take to be an advanced speaker in Y language? Yet, the problem I kept running into was that I spent

so much time looking at how long it was going to take to learn that I missed out on time I could've spent actually learning the language. I learned that you don't get fluent by knowing how long it's going to take. You get fluent for each hour practicing.

Yes, there are more efficient ways to learn. Regardless, I'll tell you the real secret to mastering a language, or anything for that matter, is to do it every day and to love doing it. So much so, you enjoy every minute of it. I believe that's why most American high school students can take four years of Spanish and graduate without speaking anything. By turning the process into a series of deadlines and assignments to complete rather than inspiring students to passionately pursue the language in class and afterwards. I say after because, my journey of learning languages is not something I can finish, it's a continual process. In the same way Jesus encourages us to grow spiritually through his promise of return, yet living and growing in our faith bears its own fruits each step along the way.

Matthew writes a story of preparedness. The five wise bridesmaids bring along extra oil, while the five foolish fail or forget to. Now after all of them wake up from their sleep, the foolish realize their lamps are out, they aren't ready for the bridegroom's, or Christ's, arrival. But what does it mean to be prepared? As Christians, our faith isn't a static belief or a series of tasks ready to complete, it is an ongoing process we live out each. This also means, it is something internal, innate to every one of us. Here in verses 8 and 9, Matthew writes the foolish asked "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.", but the wise reply 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us'. (What does it mean to be prepared?) Now isn't this strange, us Christians love to talk about building community and loving thy neighbor, yet here Jesus says the oil, our preparedness for the last day, can't be shared.

Just like learning a language or mastering the skill you've always wanted to learn, **no one else can prepare you for what is to come**. We cannot rely on borrowed faith or the spirituality of others. Even the best teachers or even a great pastor, the best they can do is show you the way. Now Jesus isn't saying that some aren't believers or that others aren't invited. All of the bridesmaids have their place at the wedding at the celebrations to come, everyone is a believer, yet the Lord cautions us that despite our belief and our welcome to his host, there is also a sacrifice that comes to that faith.

Faith coming at a cost is something you may be familiar with, it means renouncing sin even if it seems dominant at society at large, giving up the narrative that our personal success is the only matter of importance, and sacrificing some of our own time to care for others in our community. Nevertheless, **this sacrifice is an investment** in our ourselves and our spirituality to continually build our relationship with God and be aware of the false warnings around us. Therefore, in verse 9 the foolish bridesmaids who only paid the price at the last minute, after hearing word of Christ's return, miss the point that we should strengthen our faith out of our own accord, not because Jesus tells us our faith is due at certain time. By asking us to be prepared for his return, without any deadline, the Lord asks not to collect our spirit at a certain time but to live out our lives in his name.

Living out God's word is a sacrifice, and we do pay for it with our time, money, and energy, but it's in service of a much greater celebration afterward. That's why at this ministry, we make it a part of who we are that we make individual sacrifices to build something greater at this ministry. Through the individual hours, from the volunteers that

put food on our tables to student leaders who arrange fellowship events to create put into this community we make a space that allows us to step back and reflect on where we are and who we are.

Personally, I find Supper Worship and 21theo to be exactly this. As a student minister, it is technically my job to be here at this ministry every Wednesday; however, while I was sitting a world away in my Jordanian apartment, thinking about who I wanted to be when I got back to Northwestern after an entire year away, I felt a calling back to this position. Although Deanna asked me to participate this year because of my previous experience, I chose to do this again because I wanted to make it a part of my identity. Not only could I learn more about God's word and continue the struggle that is faith in God, but I also knew this grounded me in my identity as a Christian by practicing and growing in my religion each and every day.

I think this is the preparation Jesus calls us to carry out. It's not about being an expert in the metaphysics of the New Testament, rather God calls us to learn and grow in community and his word, making it a habit and building it into our lives. This way your lamp will never run out, no matter how long we have to wait. I hope you've felt that same lamp-filling, renewal of the spirit after leaving 21theo.

I'd like to end this by saying: by keeping your lamp-filled, you aren't just keeping your spirit prepared for Christ's return. You make a light that shines to others. For example. This week's 21theo we will talk about mental health, a subject difficult to talk about openly in normal life. It seems like there is no good time or place for anyone to bring it up, but this week we'll talk about the power of sharing the stories that let others know they aren't as alone as they thought were. If we keep our lamps-filled and our spirits awake, focusing on what's important in the present moment, we can take the time to listen to a friend that might be suffering in silence. In this way, part of staying prepared is shining your light to others, lighting up their darkness, and encouraging them with the good news to come.