24th Sunday after Pentecost
November 8, 2026
Text: Matthew 25:1-13
Theme: Stay Prepared

The parable of the 10 virgins is one of the most well-known passages in the Holy Scriptures. I wonder sometimes if Jesus thought of Aesop's fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper which was written some 500 years before his birth. The parable of the virgins is similar with an important twist.

In the fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper, we see the ant working diligently throughout the summer to store up food for the winter while the grasshopper lazes about in the warm sunshine and puts off work until later. Of course, the late autumn comes and the grasshopper has no food while the ant has plenty. The grasshopper whines that he couldn't prepare because he was making music all summer. The ants shrug and say, then go dance.

To an uninformed person, the two stories may look almost identical. The wise virgins are the ants who prepared for the coming of the bridegroom by bringing extra oil for their lamps and the foolish virgins are the grasshoppers who failed to prepare and had no oil. On the surface, one might think Jesus is teaching works righteousness. If one does not do the appropriate amount of work, then one will be excluded from the marriage feast which is heaven.

We interpret the Bible with a specific principle: Scripture interprets Scripture. In other words, anything we seek to understand in the Bible must be compared and contrasted to other teachings of the Bible. We do not turn to outside texts or human wisdom to try to interpret Scripture. Therefore, we know that works righteousness, which is clearly taught as wrong, is off the table. Among many other places, the Bible says clearly in Ephesians 2:8-9,

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Applying that to the parable of the virgins we know the difference. The only way one is permitted to enter heaven is by the grace of God. Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins and his blood washes us clean of sin so that we are pure and able to enter the banquet hall. This righteousness is neither something we can earn, nor are we called to try to earn it. In fact, by trying to earn righteousness we change our salvation into a wage and it becomes impossible to grasp.

Think about what the virgins are there to do. They are to keep their lamps burning until the bridegroom arrives. It was the common practice of that day for wedding feasts to go on for days. It would begin with the bridegroom moving in a processional to the home of the bride and then together they would process to the home he had prepared for them. Remember in John 14 when Jesus said,

"In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

Jesus is likening our entry into paradise to being the bride who is coming to the home that her groom has prepared for her. We are both the bride and the virgins. Jesus is escorting us into our mansion and we are waiting for his arrival. Now, about the lamps.

Remember that there were no streetlights in those days. Have you been in a place at night where there is no artificial light? Living in Chicago for 21 years, I had forgotten how dark the desert is. When we first arrived, we lived out near Happy Valley Road and apparently, they ran out of street lights when they built those sections of the city. I was used to our neighborhood in Lombard, a suburb of Chicago where there is a bright street light every few yards. In fact, we didn't even need nightlights at our house because it was so bright outside. Now imagine no light whatsoever except whatever the moon might afford. So, at night, the wedding attendants carried lamps. Just like the Sonoran Desert, the Judean desert was full of creepy crawlies and one needed a light for safety. The light of the lamps was what kept the virgins and the processional safe.

Darkness is dangerous. As we wait for the bridegroom to come and usher us into our mansion, we want to stay in the light. We cannot earn our way into the mansion. Entry into the mansion is only given, never earned. Our entry fee was paid by the bridegroom on the cross. His blood was given and shed for us. But until he returns, we live in a dark, dangerous world and we want to keep our lamps lit and our faith safe. The oil that lights our lamps is called the means of grace. It is the word of God in the Holy Bible. It is the waters of Holy Baptism that we remember are continually washing over us. It is the very body and blood of the bridegroom which we are fed twice a month at this altar. These means of grace are the ways in which the oil of God's power enters our lamps and keeps our lamps burning brightly thus protecting us from the darkness.

If our faith dies while we wait, and the bridegroom comes, it will be too late. There will be those whose oil ran dry because they thought that the Word of God was just another old book. They rejected the power of their baptisms as just a church ritual that their parents thought was important. They neglected worship and reception of the Lord's Supper because they were busy with life and there would be time for all that religious stuff later. But as happened for the grasshopper, later will come all too quickly for them. Once the lamp has gone out, and the bridegroom is at the door, there is nothing more that can be done and the door will be shut. The spiritual grasshoppers will hear the most horrible words ever to be heard. "I do not know you."

This parable is important for us because we are reminded that this time we spend worshipping our Lord, hearing his Word and receiving his body and blood is useful and important. It fills our lamps with oil and keeps us safely in the light of Christ until he returns for us. But almost as importantly, this parable reminds us that the time is short for the grasshoppers. We are not like the ants who blithely shrug and tell them to go dance. We are called to proclaim the warning to the grasshoppers – to invite them to come fill their lamps before it is too late. Jesus suffered death and damnation for them so that they could live in peace and joy, and when earthly life is over, join us with him in paradise. Rejoice in being Jesus' servant who has been filled with the oil of gladness and now shines his light for all the grasshoppers of the world to see.