

Text: Matthew 25:1-13 (Beck).

Saints Triumphant.

November 19, 2017.

Grace and peace belong to you, Triumphant Saints, through Jesus our coming Savior. Amen.

There are some things others can do for you. You can pay someone to clean your house. You can pay someone to do your grocery shopping. I've even heard accounts of people paying someone to sit in a class and take notes for them. But you still have to take the test yourself, right? And you can't pay someone to exercise for you and expect to get the benefits. You can't have someone else go on a diet and you expect to lose weight. And if you paid someone to sit in church and take notes for you, would you really get the benefit of hearing the sermon first hand, seeing other believers face to face, receiving Jesus' body and blood? Could you have someone else believe for you, have faith in Jesus for you, go to heaven for you? I think we'd all agree, no one can believe for you. Someone else's faith won't get you to heaven. Someone else believing won't give you the comfort when your spouse dies, the assurance God is working all things together for the good of those who love him. No one can believe for you.

Jesus illustrated this with a parable, an earthly story with a deeper, spiritual truth. There were ten girls. They each took their own lamps. It's interesting in looking at the original language that every time the lamps are referred to, it's always their own lamps. They weren't sharing lamps. Each had their own. No one can have a lamp for you. No one can believe for you. These lamps were probably oil-soaked rags on top of long poles more like torches and every so often the rags would have to be trimmed and more oil applied. And again, you had to have your own torch. No one could have one for you. No one can believe for you.

It's night. There are no street lights. And here's how weddings worked then. The groom would be accompanied by friends and he would go to the home of the bride's parents, and take the bride back to his own house with a big, happy procession. When they arrived at the groom's house, that's where the marriage feast was held, often lasting seven days or even longer. It's no coincidence that Jesus uses the imagery of a wedding. The Bible uses this picture over and over and over again to picture the close and intimate love that Jesus, our heavenly groom, has for each of us, his heavenly bride.

But let's get back to the girls. Five were foolish and five were wise. Five didn't bring extra oil. Very silly. You couldn't join the procession without your own torch. If you were honored enough to be asked to serve as a bridesmaid, you wanted to do your best, cover every detail, and remember that weddings are good places to meet a future husband. Five brought extra oil. They listened to mom and they were prepared. They knew they could always leave the oil in their purse if they didn't need it, but they couldn't use it if they didn't have it. The distinction that Jesus is making is not so much between unbelievers and believers. The first verse says, "The kingdom of heaven will be like." The distinction is between ready believers and not ready believers, between those who are constantly ready until the end and believers who get lazy in their faith, or maybe appear to have faith, but who think their connection with someone else will get them to heaven. I once asked someone, "Are you sure you will be in heaven?" The answer? "Yeah, my mom played organ at church for a long time." Mom's playing organ won't get you to heaven. No one can believe for you.

Well, as usually happens, the groom delayed. When does a wedding reception ever start on time? Of all the weddings I've been to, only once, did we start eating at the time printed on the invitation. You have to be ready for delays. Tell your kids to bring their phones. There's going to be downtime. Find some friends and play cards or find something to do, because it's going to be a while. At that time, the delay meant having your own extra oil for your own lamp, so you could be ready, for yourself, at any time. Finally, at midnight, there was a shout, "Here's the groom! Come out and meet him!" This was the

moment they had been waiting for. Now was the time. No coincidence that the parable says this was at midnight. The time you'd least expect. The time you'd most likely be asleep. You need to be ready at any time. You need to be ready when you least expect it. Remember that the groom stands for Jesus and the wedding banquet stands for heaven. This is the call to be ready for Jesus and join him in heaven. Well, five of them were ready. They had their own extra oil. Five were not ready. They didn't have their own oil for their own torches.

The foolish five tried everything they could. Can we borrow some from the wise? Nope! There will never, ever, ever, ever, be enough for us and you. Strongest negative they could possibly use. The wise weren't being mean and refusing to share, they are just stating the fact and illustrating the greater truth. No one can ever believe for you. Ever! So the foolish five try to go to the dealers and buy some. Not a lot of places open at midnight. It takes a long time. It's too late. No one can believe for you.

Now the wise five, they are ready. Did you catch that? The girls who were ready. That's what stands out about them. That's where our focus is. They were ready. They looked the same as the foolish for a long time. They were all bridesmaids. They all fell asleep while waiting. But at the crucial moment, they were ready. When the groom came, they were prepared. They joined the party. They went to heaven. Meanwhile, the foolish five are scurrying around trying to find some more oil. Somehow, they finally do. But when they arrive, the door was shut. It was closed. Locked. Bolted. Once and for all. That actually would have been unusual for a wedding at that time. The door would normally stay open for the seven days of the feast and people could come and go, just like those who show up late to a reception still get in. But that's what Jesus did with parables. He concludes with a twist, something out of the norm that really stands out and really drives home the point. The time is now! There's no second chance. You don't know when it will be too late for you. Show up late and you will not show up at all. No one can believe for you.

The foolish five beg to get in. They knock on the door. They are extremely polite. "Lord, lord." They looked like believers for a long time. They want to be included in the wedding, in the Church. But I was struck by this comment I read on this verse. The day is coming when many fake believers would gladly be found in the condition of true Christians and those who now hate the apparent strictness of the Christian religion, will at death and judgment, wish for the solid comforts of Christ.

But none are given. They thought another could believe for them. They thought they could borrow oil from others or buy from those who had more than enough. But they hear this harsh and eternal answer. "I tell you the truth, I don't know you." Wow! Wow! This is the truth. This is the solemn declaration. I don't know you at all. It's not that we weren't real close and so you didn't get an invite. I have no idea who you are. I don't recognize you at all. I have no head knowledge of you. The foolish five thought they could skate by, riding the coattails of others, only to find out too late and forever, no one can believe for you.

So what? Nice story about some people long ago. What about me? What about you? Think you can ride the coattails? You'll probably never give an answer as crass as, "My mom played organ." But yeah, my family went to church. Christmas and Easter and a few family times is fine. I'm good. Obviously, you're here. But just going through the motions? Thinking this kind of outward connection will be enough? Maybe someone can believe for me. What about being ready? At any time? Maybe this is where it really hits home. After soccer season. After football season. After baseball season. After summer. Then it's soccer season again. After the kids get older and can pay attention. After my job is more settled, I can set my schedule, after, after, after. Ready now? Ready today? Ready at midnight? You don't know the day or hour when Jesus is coming. Ready in a minute, a second? Yeah, we've failed. We've fallen short.

We've sinned.

So Jesus came to fix it. He came to live a perfect life of readiness, so God looks at you like you lived that perfect, holy, righteous life. Yeah. Jesus lived. Jesus died for your failures to be ready, for my sins of being lazy, for our sins of falling asleep. They are all forgiven. Jesus died. And Jesus rose to prove he is the perfect groom. He ascended to assure he's got the perfect wedding waiting for us in heaven. Free food. Free drink. And best of all, a seat at the head table, right next to Jesus! Right next to Jesus! He washed you clean and holy in baptism to declare you his triumphant saint. In those waters he married you, made his eternal promise of never-ending, undying love for you and presents you to God every day without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but as the pure and holy bride of Christ you are.

So how can we be ready? How can we keep awake? What you are doing right now is a huge step. Don't pay someone else to take notes for you. Take notes for yourself. Talk about this word of God you are hearing. It's so cool that over 100 people are discussing these messages more in Vine and Branches. Talk about the sermon when you ride in the car and before you go to bed and when you get up in the morning. Sing a hymn, maybe just one line from one hymn you really liked today. And don't just let someone else give you the book report on the Bible once a week. Read it yourself. Don't put off daily devotions until tomorrow when things are less busy. Make the time today. Don't wait until after, after, after to read your Bible. Do it today. You've got the wedding invitation. You just don't know when the reception is going to start. You get to be ready and anxious and waiting and excited all the time. Amen.