

LIVE EXPECTANTLY

Sunday, November 12, 2017

Proper 27

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Our text today is from Matthew 25:1-13:

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Every year around this time, the energy experts give us a report on our fuel supplies for the upcoming winter. While this may not be the most significant federal reports Floridians wait for, it does have major significance for most people, and indirect significance for each one of us! Do we have enough reserves to see our nation through a long, cold winter? Throughout the summer months, refineries have been filling our storage facilities. Winters are always long and they are always cold. Not to prepare for the inevitable would be disastrous!

On an even more crucial scale, in the Parable of the Ten Virgins, Jesus makes the point for full spiritual oil reserves. If we diligently keep our national energy reserves full, how much more important is it for us to keep our spiritual reservoirs full?

When was the last time you evaluated your oil reserves?

Jesus tells this parable because many church members have no fuel in their tanks. Many people who once had fuel have since run out. Do you know of someone who was once active but hasn't attended worship for quite some time? Do you know of a young person who viewed confirmation as just a graduation? Do you know of someone who attends church but the experience is hollow and empty?

Sadly, people whose faith has been depleted are no longer in a saving relationship with Jesus, yet still believe they are saved. How many people once were excited for Jesus and loved the Lord, but the world around them has stopped the flow of oil to their reservoir? Somewhere along the line, the gift of faith was not replenished and maintained.

Evaluating our oil reserves is very tricky. The first secret we need to learn is not to overestimate what we really possess...most people think they have more oil than they really do! What about you? Is your oil reserve such that you are ready for the return of Jesus? In our text, all ten virgins thought they were ready, but only five were! We cannot read anything into the 50% failure rate, but we can say with certainty that quite a few people who think they are ready to meet the Lord, are not ready at all!

Many people aren't ready for the return of Jesus. There are members in our congregation who have their lamps, they have the invitation to heaven in their hand, and they think they will one day arrive in heaven. But they don't have the necessary oil in their lamps. They are not prepared. And when Jesus does return, it will be too late for them to deal with their oil shortage. This "oil" is serious business...you only have one chance at getting it right and entering heaven.

For example, let's look at the Parable Jesus tells. It's all about a wedding. In Jesus' time, marriage customs were slightly different. There was a ceremony of engagement that legally bound a couple together. The husband would then leave his bride and go and prepare a room in his father's house where they would live. No one knew when he would return; only the groom's father could give the necessary permission for the groom to return. But the attendants had to be ready. Often, the groom's return would not be as soon as hoped, and often it would be at night. If he came at night, the attendants would need oil in their lamps for the festive journey to the wedding celebration. If they had no oil, they would be excluded from the feast.

Jesus has returned to heaven, to His Father's house, to prepare a place for us. When he returns to take us to the marriage feast of the Lamb, we must be ready with oil in our reservoirs. No one will be able to borrow or buy oil at the last moment.

It's a simple matter of keeping our oil level full.

Unfortunately, there are many things that drain our oil. Even church activities affect our oil reservoir. Whenever there is strife in the church, people focus on problems, wasting time and energy and burning valuable oil. Then there are those who focus on finances; who are more concerned about how the dollar is spent than on the Savior for whom we spend it. We can even focus on structure, organization, worship and activities at the expense of Jesus.

Issues like these burn precious oil and deplete our reserves. This isn't a problem so long as we replenish our oil. But, if we burn our oil without it being replenished, we become a casualty of heaven. Suddenly, we are not even aware that our tank is empty and we are not ready for the return of Jesus. That's why we must keep our focus on Jesus.

The fact that our oil level can fluctuate, points to the fact that there is something in our Christian life that is constantly being used up and in need of being replenished. Just like we need to continuously eat food to remain strong, we need a continuous intake of grace.

It begins with steady and faithful worship...people who don't faithfully worship weekly can never have a full tank. There is also Bible study, Scripture reading, daily devotions, and prayer that also ensure a flow of oil to us and allow us to "top off our tanks." God's Word and Sacraments keep our faith alive and our tanks "topped off."

Only by keeping our oil reservoirs full can we wait for the return of Jesus without worry. We do not want to become like one of those foolish virgins who thought they were ready but weren't. God doesn't want us to live with false notions; He wants us to be confident whether we live today or die tomorrow. We don't know when we will die, nor do we know when Jesus will return, but knowing we are ready takes all the fear out of living or dying. This comfort is only ours when our tanks are filled with faith in Jesus.

Just because someone knows Jesus is going to return, and is even looking forward to His return, doesn't mean that person is ready for His return. Sadly, many who think they are ready are not ready. Jesus wants us to be prepared. The oil of faith must keep our lamps burning. We must always evaluate our oil reserves and always keep our tanks filled. Only then will we be ready when Jesus returns.