

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

1Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

As we approach the end of the Pentecost season, the focus of our Scripture readings has changed. For many weeks now, the readings have focussed on discipleship, on learning from Christ's teaching to his own disciples, and how we can pattern our own lives according to His example and teachings. In the readings for today, the emphasis has shifted to the end-time, that day when we will all be called to give an account of what we have done with our life.

Giving an account of anything in our life at a moments notice, is not something we like to think about. All of us, whether we admit it or not, have things in our lives that fall into that a category, things that we would rather put off until tomorrow, or even indefinitely. Things like giving up smoking, perhaps, or going on a diet, maybe going to the doctor for that long delayed checkup, or making out a will. After all, we are very busy. And so we'll write that letter to our good friend next week, and we'll call our sick aunt tomorrow when we have more time. Some day we'll remember to say, "I love you," to our family as we fly out the door to yet another meeting, and to thank God for the many ways God graces our lives as we move through each day. Like the Israelites, we may get away with this for a time, but what these readings have to teach us, and what we already know from our own experience, is that there is not always that next time available to us, and tomorrow may indeed be too late.

The Gospel reading today brings us the same message. In the words from Matthew we encounter ten bridesmaids, all dressed and ready with their lamps to accompany the bridal procession.

In those days the groom went to the bride's house first and then, after some time, the procession accompanied the couple to the groom's house where the ceremony took place.

To anyone who has ever been involved with a wedding, it should come as no surprise that there was a delay at the bride's house, and so these ten bridesmaids, growing weary in the later part of the day, fell asleep. When the call finally came for the procession to begin, they hastily assembled, but five of the bridesmaids found that their lamps were low, they had little oil left to burn. They tried to borrow from the others who had brought extra oil with them, but, fearing they would also run out of oil, they refused to share and told them to go buy oil. While they were gone, the bridegroom appeared and the procession took place, and when they were all inside his house for the celebration, the door was closed. When the other bridesmaids came back, they were turned away with the words, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you".

These words may sound so harsh to our ears, and yet we do know from living out our everyday life, that no opportunity lasts forever. How many times have we heard it said of someone who was awarded a wonderful and promising job, "They were certainly at the right place at the right time." And sometimes, in our quickness to say that, we tend to forget that this person had probably been very diligent in preparing their resume, in checking on openings, and in making themselves available when the time was right. Even if they were sleeping when the call came, their lamps were filled and they were ready to go.

That is the way it must be with each of us. The message of this

parable is that whenever Christ calls, we must be ready. Just as happened to the bridesmaids, there will be no time to run to the nearest gas station, or supermarket, or even here to church, to find the oil that has been lacking in our spiritual lives. We can't borrow it from a neighbor because it has to come from within ourselves. Our Spiritual life is a personal matter, between us individually and our relationship with God.

In the Jewish tradition, oil has long been a symbol of a faith that resulted in good deeds, all in preparation for the return of the Lord. For us the same is true. We are not to sit idly by, to be found sleeping, but to live out the Gospel in our daily lives every day, in the hope of the glory that will be revealed to us. In other words, we have to be ready.

As we move quickly toward the close of the church year, we need to consider, and reconsider, the kinds of choices we make in our lives that drain this oil from us and leave us unprepared to meet Christ. Do the choices we make leave us too busy to give God the time God deserves? Do these things take precedence over our spiritual lives? Is there some group in our church that we've thought about joining, but have never gotten around to it?

Is there someone in our family we need to make peace with, or perhaps an elderly neighbor who would be cheered up by a phone call, or a plate of supper? All these things that we should do, that we don't do, or that we simply put off doing, can drain our oil so that we are not only ineffective and unprepared to do God's work and God's will, but we also lose the joy that comes from being in a right relationship with God. Jesus' challenge to us, is that we demonstrate by the way we live, that we are part of his celebration at every moment, that we are ready.

Of course there are things in this life that we have to do and things we want to do, and that's just fine. The point is to go on

loving all that is a legitimate part of life and to have fun doing it, but at the same time to always keep in mind where we are going, what is our final destination, and will this affect how we live each moment of our journey. We need to live each moment as if the next step would lead us through the door to be with Jesus forever.

Paul puts it this way in his message to the Thessalonians, “You yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. You are all children of light and children of the day. So then let us not fall asleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober, for God has destined us not for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ”

AMEN.