

In Nomine Iesu

The Last Sunday after Trinity 2023 Putting last things first – Matthew 25:1-13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our King, our Judge, and our Savior. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom when the cry rang out, “Here is the Bridegroom!” Only on the last day will the truth of this parable be fulfilled. The foolishness of the foolish and the wisdom of the wise will be plain to all. Divine patience will end. The door of the kingdom of heaven will be opened to one, and closed to the other. On that day He who told this parable will speak words of divine justice: “Truly I say to you, I do not know you.” Then will He, who is holy and true, whom Revelation calls the One “who has the key of David, who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens,” (Revelation 3:7) fulfill the prophecy completely.

“Who shuts and no one opens.” This is He who “sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.” Do we take the Apostles’ Creed seriously? Do we understand what these words mean? We must be clear about this because many today who identify as Christian no longer know about the judgment of the world or its Judge. In fact, the idea that there will be a throne of judgment before which we all must give answer has vanished from the hearts and minds of many. This is the profound revolution that has overtaken Christendom in these last days.

I

It is said that the worldview of the Bible was primitive, as was that of the Middle Ages, and of the Reformation. It is said they believed that the earth was the center of the universe, over which the heavens, where God dwelt, were stretched out, and under which was hell. This worldview, they say, ended with modern astronomical discoveries. For us earth is no longer at the center of the universe. The immensity of space has taken the place of the heavens of old. There is no place in the universe for Him who, God’s Word says, will come on the clouds to judge the world. There is no place in the immensity of space for a heaven where all the saints dwell, or for a hell where all the damned languish forever.

But this supposed naïve ancient worldview is not the view of the Bible. To be sure the Bible pictures everything divided between heaven and hell, with the world in between. But the early church fathers did not **speak** in the simplistic terms modern

skeptics imagine. They knew no one could portray these things in anything other than figurative language, because such things are beyond our understanding. They knew the throne of God was like no human king's throne. They knew that God is spirit, unlimited by time and space, and Lord over them. They knew that the Old Testament says of God, "The heavens and all the heaven's heavens cannot contain You." (1 Kings 8:27) Yet they did not forget that the New Testament tells us Christ ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father, eternal, omnipresent, almighty, and yet He is with us to the end of the world. (Matthew 28:20)

The great teachers of the Church from the days of the Apostles to the Reformation were not foolish and naïve children. They were as deep and perceptive thinkers as the best modern ones. They recognized that the truth of creation and the fall into sin, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, His atonement and reconciliation of God and man, lie beyond science; and that this great, final truth still stands firm despite all theories: "Behold He is coming on the clouds" and "every eye will see Him, all who pierced Him, and every race of the earth." (Revelation 1:7) For that reason the Church confesses: "from there He will come to judge the living and the dead."

The revolution in spirituality today is that people have stopped seeing Christ as the Judge of the world. They reject the very possibility of judgment! Yet all Christians once believed that on judgment day all would be revealed, all hidden sins, every evil act, every lie, every act devoid of love--everything. And **they lived their lives accordingly!** This belief was fundamental to all western civilization. One cannot understand the Middle Ages without understanding the hymn, "The World is Very Evil" (ELH 534) It was sung on this Sunday century after century. Similarly, one cannot understand the Reformation without seeing that the Bible reveals a gracious God who forgives sinners for the sake of the suffering and death of His own Son. This recognition shook the entire continent of Europe and beyond, and changed history. In our day forgiveness is no longer seen as free, but cheap. We are told to forgive ourselves for what we've done, and move on. That isn't the forgiveness the Bible pictures coming from God. It is not forgiveness "richly and daily" given, as Luther says in the catechism. The truth is that he who forgives himself of his sins has become his own god. Modern man has reversed the role of God and Man.

II

Biblically, God is the Judge and man the defendant. Modern spirituality reversed this and put man in the judge's seat and God in the defendant's. The Reformation's key insight was God's justification of sinners. So-called Christianity today thinks it must defend the God of the Bible: If God created the world, it asks, why is it full of injustice? If God is love, shouldn't He accept us as we are? If we can forgive each other, why does God require a terrible, bloody sacrifice before He will forgive? If God revealed Himself in history, and willed to choose a particular people as His own, why did He choose Israel? Why not a more noble race? With these questions moderns call the living God before the judgment seat of their own reason.

But we cannot so easily dismiss Him to whom all authority on heaven and earth is given. We cannot abolish the judgment day toward which all the world's history is hurtling. We who think we have changed places with God, cannot dismiss death, which the Bible binds so closely together with judgment: "It is appointed for men to die once, and then the judgment." (Hebrews 9:27). Why not? Because death remains, even though philosophers and scientists try to prove that there is nothing to death, nothing on the other side of it. Man fears it. And earth remains a mass grave, where all people, all nations, all kingdoms, and all cultures find their end. Death remains, and cannot be ignored. It testifies to the truth the Bible proclaims.

God remains the one who sets boundaries. He is the Holy One who opens and no one shuts, who shuts and no one opens. This is the truth the world, particularly the formerly Christian west, has forgotten. Are we still ready to proclaim this truth to our world? The gospel for this last Sunday of the church year should cause us to ask: Is not the church of the twenty first century more like the foolish virgins than we would like to think? Is the foolishness of the five perhaps not our foolishness? Have we become tired and sleepy even in the bright light of God's word? Have we let the lamps of faith, with which we would joyfully escort the coming Christ into the wedding banquet, grow dangerously dim? Do we not hear the mighty voice cry, "Wake up, He is coming?" Or will we wake too late, only to hear Him say, "Truly I say to you, I do not know you?" Do we no longer take deep comfort and joy in His promises without tiring from the wait, without tiring of proclaiming His truth?

We have been called to declare the truth of His coming, the truth that in Him all sin is forgiven and the door of heaven stands open to all who believe. Dear members and friends of Parkland Lutheran Church, we've been called to proclaim this truth in our community, bound together to help and support this great mission.

Lest you grow tired, know this: He who closes and no one opens, is also the One who opens and no one closes. This is the calling of Him whom God - who so loved the world - sent into the world to be its Savior. He is coming to judge the living and the dead. He says: "Whoever believes in Me shall live even though he may die." (John 11:25) He intercedes for each one who believes in Him. He is the Redeemer of the world, who vows that not one who believes in Him will be lost, because He is the One who **opens and no one closes**. So what does this truth mean for people who no longer know of judgment and of a Judge? Well, look at all those around you, in your neighborhood. See what is happening in your nation. See how inwardly poor a people becomes who presume to stand in judgment of God. See how they think. Realize that those who no longer have a home in heaven only love the earth more dearly, even as their sense of hopelessness and homelessness grows.

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But One still speaks boldly, still reaches out to the lost and dying humanity. One still promises us, "**he who hears you, hears Me;**" still says, "Whoever believes in me, though he die yet shall he live." (John 11:25); still assures us "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 1:8). Dear friends, hear the Holy and True One, who closes and no one opens, who opens and no one closes. Hear Him **who puts the last things first for us**, and so makes us wise unto salvation, enabling us to know and – yes! – even speak this truth to a dying world. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria