

There's an American tradition that happens at almost every American wedding. The husband will take the garter from his wife's leg and toss it to the eligible unmarried bachelors in the crowd. The wife will take her bouquet and toss it to the eligible unmarried women in the crowd. It is thought that the one to catch it will be the next one to get married. These are examples of American traditions.

The Jews had traditions as well. Some time after the groom had asked the bride to marry him and gotten the consent of the parents, he would go over to the bride's house at sometime during the early evening and escort her to the wedding banquet. Then on the way to the wedding banquet, the bride's maiden companions - the virgins - would wait for the groom and bride to come, and escort them to the place of the festival with lamps. They would pick a point between the bride's house and the place of the festival, and wait there until the procession would pass. Then when the bride and groom got there, they would use their lamps in the festal procession. The "lamp" or torch probably was a big stick with a rag wrapped around the top, which would be doused with oil--olive oil, most likely--and then lit. So it was important that you would have not only a lamp or torch, but also oil for the lamp, or else it would not stay lit. This was the tradition.

God has an important lesson he wants to teach us from this story today. Very soon Jesus will take some of us to the triumphal wedding banquet in heaven, while others will find they are locked out and face hell. The question is, how can we be one of the triumphant? Jesus makes it clear: Christian, "Keep Your Lamp Burning!"

As we look at all of the young ladies in our lesson, both the wise and the foolish, they shared something in common. They were all waiting for the coming of the bridegroom. So who could this represent? Not everybody in the world is waiting for Jesus to come on Judgment Day. So these virgins must be representative of the people in this world who are waiting for the Second Coming of Christ. These are people who know who Christ is, who have heard that He was coming, who have some knowledge of the Bible. These are people who are part of the visible church. In other words, these young ladies are people who are members of Open Bible Lutheran Church.

Ok, you say, how do I know if I am a wise virgin or a foolish one? The Greek word for foolish is maroni, or Moron. I surely don't want to be a moron and have the door shut on me oneday. I want to be one of the wise ones.

What makes the wise virgins wise, and what makes the foolish virgins foolish? There were two things that made the 5 virgins wise, and the other five foolish. The first thing you notice was that 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 foolish virgins thought that the bridegroom would come right away. So they assumed they would have enough oil to escort him into the banquet hall. They assumed that their oil would last, but it didn't. When the groom arrived late, the foolish virgins didn't have enough oil to have a procession for him.

So what does this mean? What does the oil and the lamp stand for? There's a passage that says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." (Ps 119:105) We know that fire is often used to picture faith. Fire also symbolizes the work of the Holy Spirit: "Do not put out the Spirit's fire" (1 Thessalonians 5:19) Paul says. On Pentecost tongues of fire that appeared on the disciples. Jesus' reference to the lamps and the oil is a reference to faith, but not only faith. It's also a reference to the fuel, the means to keep the flame of faith alive, namely the Means of Grace, The Gospel in Word and

Sacraments. So we could look at the oil as symbolic for the Word of God that keeps our lamps of faith burning. The more you hear the Word, the stronger your faith will become.

Staying in the faith is a lot like staying in shape. I used to be able to eat all I wanted and stay right around 210-220 pounds. But as I have gotten older, it isn't so easy to keep the weight off and stay in shape. I try to walk my dog Brodie every day from 6:00 to 7:00 A.M. for 2 miles. But I still eat tootsie rolls, red jelly beans from Fresh Market, icecream cones from MacDonald's, and popcorn, so I don't seem to be losing any weight, but actually have gained 20 pounds. My wife is telling me its because I am tired, or because I have sleep apnia. She may be right. But one thing I know. I need to eat right, exercise, if I want to stay in top shape.

That's the way faith is. If we aren't careful, we start becoming spiritual blobs. Coming to church doesn't seem as exciting as it may have earlier. It may get to be routine. So you may start daydreaming during the service. Then you feel like you have to go to Pickleball, Water Volleyball, or work at that part-time job on some Sundays. Having a morning devotion takes time, and you have other things to do. That Bible study or small group just is too much church for a week. Before you know it, your faith is flickering, and you are unsure of your salvation, because you aren't in the Word. There is a danger that you may run out of oil.

Fortunately, many of us here today know the importance of keeping our spiritual tanks full. We come to church weekly.. We read our Bibles at home. We have family devotions. What God is saying to us today is "KEEP IT UP! Stay wise!" You never know when something terrible will happen to you, when you'll need that extra boost of God's Word in your life. If the devil were to give you a stroke today, would you have the faith to stand up under the pressure? If God were to allow your IRA or 401K to be worthless today, you pension taken away, would you give up on God, because your faith isn't strong enough? If God allowed your child to be killed in a car accident, would you give up on God? You never know what may happen in your future, before the Son comes. None of us know exactly how we will respond to tragedy. But our odds of staying strong increase greatly when you stay in the Word. Then the devil can't tear our faith away from us.

One of the things that may discourage us today in our lesson are the words that the bridegroom took a "long time in coming." Two-thousand years later, we understand what Jesus meant by "a long time in coming." In fact, with the world as it is, we may be wondering what in the world Jesus is waiting for. It's the apostle Peter who gently reminds us that ***"the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise...he is patient...not wanting anyone to perish" (2 Peter 3:9)***. It's God's love for the lost that keeps this world going.

Jesus' statement that the bridegroom will be a long time in coming is a warning sign alongside the road of our spiritual journey through life. "Be Aware!" the sign says, "Waiting for Jesus May Be a Long Haul!" A long haul not just in the sense of a lot of time passing, but also a long haul in the sense that we will encounter tremendous difficulties and obstacles along the way. It is essential that we stock up on extra oil, by being in the Word. That will equip us to be wise virgins.

There was one other thing that made these virgins foolish. When the foolish virgins realized that they didn't have enough oil, 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.

What does this mean? Jesus is saying to you, “Another person’s faith will not cover you”. Just because you were reared in a Christian home or you are in church with other people of faith does not necessarily mean that you have faith. It will not rub off just by sitting next to someone who has a vital relationship with Christ. You cannot “catch” faith like you catch a cold. You cannot borrow it from your friends, and you cannot get it from your parents. God has no grandchildren, only children. Every spiritual birth comes directly from him. Your faith needs to be your own. The wife who went to church just to appease her husband will be left out in the outer darkness. The children who went to church just because their parents made them will have the door of heaven slammed in their faith. The parents who came to church just so their children would have support while they sang in church, will be left out of the wedding banquet. The faith of your parents or your spouse will do you absolutely no good on Judgment Day.

But there’s good news from this parable. 5 of the virgins were wise. They brought extra oil. They woke up, lit their lamps, and kept them burning. They stayed in the faith. And the bridegroom brought them into the wedding feast. They didn’t have to break down the door. They didn’t have to pay the groom to let them in. The groom just let them in for free. They were there for the procession, so the groom let them in.

What is not mentioned in this story today is what the groom had to go through before this banquet ever took place. The groom had to prepare the wedding hall. It didn’t take just a few pounds of silver or gold. He had to use His own blood to open this wedding hall to all of the virgins. The groom had to put himself up on a cross, be put to death, buried, and rise from the dead, just so we could have the opportunity to live in heaven forever. That’s quite a bit of work just to prepare for a wedding feast. The groom, Jesus gave us a free entrance ticket to the wedding feast by the Gospel promise, “whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.”

If you are a person who feels crushed when God’s law strikes your heart, and who feels happy when you are told you are forgiven, then you are holding that ticket to heaven right now. You are in that procession. As long as you are sorry for your sins, and believe in Jesus as your Savior, your lamp is lit. Jesus promises you that you don’t have to try and bust your way into the wedding feast. You don’t have to knock. You don’t have to plead. He is offering you a free ticket to the feast.

A couple of years ago I had a member of a congregation take me for a drive out in the country. He drove me by a house that was kind of run down. The grass was all overgrown, and there were things laying all over the lawn. Then he told me, “I spent a lot of time in that house. For years and years I spent time mowing that lawn, and keeping that house look like brand new. I had to sell it. Now look at all of my work. It was all for nothing.” I felt bad for him.

Think about all the work that God has done to make sure that you could come to the Wedding Feast. He’s paid for your ticket so that you can go to heaven free of charge. He used His own blood to pay for it. He’s given you a lifetime supply of oil in the Word of God. He’s given you the lamp of faith. He’s made all the preparations. He wants to see you there. Don’t disappoint Him. Don’t let all His work go to waste. Keep your lamps alive. Keep your fire of faith in Jesus burning, so that you’ll be a Triumphant Saint when the Bridegroom comes.