

Today is Saints Triumphant Sunday. It's a day for us to think about our believing loved ones who have gone before us. My grandfather passed away about a month ago. And I will never forget at his funeral, the congregation singing in very loud voices the opening hymn, "For all the saints who from their labors rest." The Bible says that when a believer dies they go to heaven to be with Jesus. And the Bible describes heaven like a wedding banquet, a joyous celebration, a party! And the Bible says that one day Jesus will come back to take us to be with him in heaven. And at this celebration we will be reunited with all our believing loved ones who have gone before us. It will be quite a party. But Jesus wants us to be ready for this party. He wants us to be prepared for his return. And that's the main point of the parable for today: Be prepared for Jesus to return.

To understand this parable, you have to understand something about weddings in Jesus' day. Weddings in Jesus' day were split into two events. In the first event, there would be a ceremony. And at this ceremony the bride and the groom would make their promises to each other and sign the legal documents. After this first event they were considered legally married. But they didn't live together yet. Instead, the groom would take a couple of weeks to get his house ready to receive his bride. And then, when his house was all prepared, the second event would take place. In the second event, the groom would leave his house and go over to the house of the bride to get his bride. And then there would be a festive procession in which the bride and groom and the whole wedding party would go back to the house of the groom. And then at the house of the groom there would be a grand banquet and a grand celebration.

Now Jesus tells a story about ten women who were standing up in a wedding. Jesus calls them ten virgins. We might call them ten bridesmaids because they were standing up in the wedding. On the day of that second event it was their job to watch for the groom and go out to meet him when the groom came to get his bride. This usually happened at night and so they had lamps. They needed lamps to light the way back to the groom's home and also the light of the lamps would help to create a festive party atmosphere for the procession. Now at this particular wedding, it took longer for the groom to come than they expected. In fact, the groom took so long, that they all fell asleep. But the groom did come. **"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'" (Matt 25:4)** But the problem was that five of them didn't have any oil for their lamps. Having a lamp without oil is like having a flashlight without any batteries. It's useless. A lamp without oil is useless. And so the foolish ones said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil." But the wise ones said, "No, there's not enough for both us and you." The wise ones thought, "If we divide our oil with you then all our lamps are going to go out and there will be no light for the procession! Go buy some oil." **"But while they were on their way to buy oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut." (Matt 25:10)** So the 5 wise virgins who were prepared got to go in to the wedding celebration and the five foolish were shut out. They were not allowed in to the wedding celebration.

Now the groom is the Lord Jesus. He is going to return and take us to be with him at the wedding party in heaven. In the story it says that the groom **"was a long time in coming."** (Matt 25:5) In the same way, it's been about two thousand years and Jesus hasn't come back yet. But just as the groom in the story came, Jesus will come back. We don't know when Jesus will come back. It could be today. It could be 100 years from now. We just don't know when Jesus will come back. He could come back at any time. And because Jesus could come back at any time, that means we have to be ready all the time for Jesus to come back. So how can we be prepared for Jesus to come back? The way to be prepared is by making diligent use of the means of grace. What I mean by that is Jesus wants us to come to church often to hear God's word. God's word is what fuels the fire of our faith. If our faith isn't fed by God's word, then our faith will eventually go out.

Being prepared also means that we sincerely believe in Jesus in our hearts. It's of course possible to come to church, but to not believe in your heart. That's like having a lamp with no oil in it. When the 5 foolish virgins

tried to get into the wedding celebration, the groom said, **“Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.” (Matt 25:12)** At first what the foolish virgins forgot to do might seem like a trivial oversight or an innocent mistake: they just forgot to bring oil. Who doesn’t forget things sometimes? But what Jesus says here, “I don’t know you” tells us that not having oil is symbolic of not having a relationship with Jesus. We’re prepared when we sincerely believe in Jesus. We are prepared when we sincerely believe the gospel that Jesus died to take away all our sins.

Being prepared also means that you believe that Jesus is coming back. It’s been two thousand years and a lot of people say, “It’s been so long, he must not be coming back.” Well, the groom in our story took a long time too, but he still came. What faithful groom isn’t going to come to get his bride? Of course a faithful groom is going to come to get his bride. Jesus, our groom, will come back to get us, his bride. He shed his blood on the cross for us and suffered hell on the cross for us. He wouldn’t go through all that for us and then not come back to get us. Also, he rose from the dead. And that proves that when he makes a promise he’s going to keep it. He promised he would rise from the dead and he did. He promised he’s going to come back and he will. So part of being prepared is believing that he’s going to come back.

And finally another part of being prepared is living our faith. Remember last week we said that true faith will always produce good works. In Matthew 7 Jesus said, **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matt 7:21-23)** Doesn’t that sound a lot like our parable? The foolish virgins also said, “Lord, Lord.” And the groom said to them “I don’t know you.” So if a person says, “I believe in Jesus,” if they say “Lord, Lord,” but if they make no effort to follow Jesus’ commands or to put their faith into practice through good works, then that’s not true faith and Jesus will say to them on the last day, “I don’t know you.” Jesus goes on in Matthew 7, **“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt 7:24).** A *wise* man, just like the *wise* virgins, is the one who hears Jesus’ words and puts them into practice in his life.

We have to admit that there have been times in our lives when we have been like the foolish virgins. There have been times when we haven’t listened to Jesus’ word or taken it to heart. There have been times when we haven’t lived like followers of Jesus. We need to repent of our foolishness and ask God to forgive us. In our prayers we should ask God, “God please make me prepared for Christ’s coming.” That’s what we asked in our Prayer of the Day for today: **“Keep us ever watchful for the coming of your Son that we may sit with him and all your holy ones at the marriage feast in heaven.”** And we know that this is a prayer that God will say “yes” to because we know that it is his will that we be saved. *God* graciously prepares *us* for Christ’s coming. God prepares us with his word. He prepares us in his word with the Law, showing us our sin so that we repent and turn to him for forgiveness. God prepares us with the Gospel, showing us that we have a Savior. God prepares us by giving us the Holy Spirit so that we believe the gospel and so that we have the power to live a Christian life. God prepares us for Christ’s coming, and by preparing us for Christ’s coming, God is preparing us for a party.

As we wait for Christ to come back, what we are waiting for is a party! We’re waiting for Jesus to come back because he’s going to take us to heaven which will be a grand celebration. And when we go into “the wedding banquet,” we will see our believing loved ones who have gone before us and we will be reunited with them in a joyous celebration. We keep watch for Jesus because it would be a shame to miss out on this party. We keep watch for Jesus because it would be a shame to miss out on all the fun. We diligently keep watch for Jesus because we want to be ready for this party, this joyous celebration with all the saints triumphant. We diligently watch for Jesus because we wouldn’t miss this party for the world. Amen.