

July 5, 2020 We Are Witnesses Pt. 11 Matthew 25:1-13

Dearly Beloved;

There can be little argument that Summer 2020 has truly arrived. Everywhere I have been (Belleville, the farmhouse and in between the two) the arrival of heat, and the lack of rain is in evidence in the browning of lawns that are usually lush and green. It is always amazing to me how weeds continue to flourish when grass ceases to grow, and flowers hang limp if not watered in a matter of a couple of days. It is only occasionally that I wear shorts but they have been the garment of choice these last two weeks, and from the forecasts, I presume for some weeks to come. It is yet another reason for me to say to you, please be careful, especially if you are out in the sun. For us as seniors, sunglasses and hats, preferably, wide brimmed hats are advisable. My family physician is a young woman. She recently complimented me for wearing wide brimmed head gear. My close cropped haircut, accomplished with Barbara's help and an electric trimmer, occasioned my doctor's voicing her desire to examine my scalp. Her compliment was the result of a conversation which began with her saying she found no "pink" spots. That led to her question as to how long I had been wearing wide brimmed hats. As most of you know, I have chosen wide brimmed hats for all the seasons of the year. That is the result of medical advice predating my own struggle with cancer and glaucoma. Beware too much sun. And continue to be cautious about Covid-19. Wash your hands, obey the 6 foot distancing rule, and when inside in any kind of gathering place, wear a

mask. Prudence and caution are the watch words these days. I remember you in my prayers and I long for a time when it will be safe for us to gather and worship in our church sanctuary. I know we grow weary of the call to be patient. But careful, patient, practice has gotten us, our province, and our nation to the point where our numbers of daily cases are making us a world leader in dealing with the pandemic. So...I report that Barbara and I continue to be well. I urge you once again to exercise care and stay safe, as we turn to the words of Jesus in Matthew 25.

If you take a moment and look through the previous chapters, and the next one, you will notice that the parable of the Ten Virgins is nestled in the midst of numbers or parables, and Jesus direct comments about the end time. This body of teaching, in Matthew's account of Jesus ministry, HIS crucifixion, and the resurrection, (because all 4 of the Gospels were written primarily to that end), is set in the last days before Jesus was arrested, tried and killed, and then rose from the dead on the 3rd day, a Sunday.

These parables are a body of teaching which Jesus did on the steps and grounds of the Temple in Jerusalem. I treasure a photograph taken by Rebekah during our first trip to the Holy Land, of a stone step at the south entrance to the Temple. My hand is placed on the step. Barbara's hand is placed on top of mine. Rebekah's hand is placed on top of the hand of her mother. The picture quietly witnesses to this fact: no one who knows the details of the history of Jesus ministry

can dispute that it was on these steps Jesus taught about the things we are reading about this morning.

The very first word in Matthew 25:1 is important. "Then!" In the NIV which we use in our sanctuary that word is enlarged into the explanatory phrase, "In that time." The time being referred to in both "then" and "in that time," has to do with the second coming of Jesus. In that time, Jesus will return as the King. The parable gives us a snapshot of what the Kingdom of Heaven will look like. It is worthy of consideration in such a time as this. In the midst of the details we will discover something that we have witnessed, something to which we are witnesses, something we have seen with our own eyes.

The parable is about 10 young women. That they are virgins, testifies to the fact that they are pure or at least innocent when it comes to the ways of the world. They all have heard about Jesus who saves. They know to whom the phrase King of Kings refers. They know that it has been said and written that Jesus will return. However, there is a detail that divides the group of Ten into Five and Five.

The Five foolish virgins have heard the King is coming, that HIS return is imminent. Aware that HE might come at any hour they take their lamps with them. The lamps in question burned olive oil, typically from a third or fourth pressing of the olives. This oil was an ancient resource. It provided fuel for light, for cooking, to some extent heat. It was

a renewable resource. The Olive groves of the Middle-East include ancient trees that have been around for a thousand years or even more, reaching back toward the time of Jesus. They have been pruned regularly and still bear fruit each year. The ancient presses involved a stone wheel. Today's machinery is more efficient, and faster and cleaner, but the end result is the same. Oil which can be used in cooking and preparing food, and a much rougher oil which can be used for other purposes, including cosmetics that do not produce allergic reactions.

The foolish virgins took their lamps with them because no one knows the hour at which the King will come. However they did not take any oil with them. The other night we arrived at bed time. The ritual with which retirement begins in our home, is that I go out into our back yard in the darkness with our two dogs, Gambler and Brandi. Our yard is relatively small, but I never fail to take a flashlight. On this particular evening guess what? I did not check the condition of the batteries. I pushed the button. The flashlight illuminated, then the light turned orange, dimmed and went out. Absolutely useless in the dark. Foolish Morley! Hence the definition of the foolish virgins. They understood the issue. They were not girl scouts. Not prepared. They are armed with the flashlights of their time, but they do not provide light.

The wise Five took both their lamps and oil. We have seen these kinds of circumstances. In a time of power failure there are lots of people who have flashlights. But not

everyone has taken the issue of power outages seriously enough to make checks as to whether or not the flashlight has current so that it will work. Then there is Barbara. She turns on the light that is part of her cell phone, goes to the drawer in the dining room and pulls out a supply of candles, sets up a dollar store candelabra, strikes a match and voila! We continue to read our books, play our game on an I pad, and await the return of Hydro. I do not hesitate to say, she is inevitably wiser than I am in a crisis. In terms of the parable I know she would make the cut as one of the Five wise. I would hope I am standing next to her as we leave. She would make sure I had extra batteries for my flashlight, or she would hand be a candle and a match or share the light from her “I device”.

Here is the part of the parable that gets really interesting. All ten of them fell asleep. The waiting for the King to come is the hardest part of the time we are in. It is not hard on some. It is hard for all. Remember the advice about patience? There is no question it is the hardest advice of all to follow. And some of us, Barbara is one of these, can walk 5,000 steps without a problem. However, standing in line to get into the Farmer’s market, is something her knees will no longer permit her to do. We made the trip to the Market this morning. We love the fresh produce you can get there, and we love that every penny we spend goes to farms that produced them or the truckers who brought product from a food terminal in Toronto. But we have learned a vital lesson. At the grocery store there may be a line-up of 3 customers. At the Farmer’s Market in downtown Belleville, it stretches around the block,

and some people are not wearing masks (we did) and some people are trusting no one has Covid-19 and are conversing face to face. We had to pass on the experience and Barbara went to the grocery store for the salad makings and fresh, whatever. Some wings of the churches have almost forgotten the part of the message about the return of the King. Most of us if not all, lose concentration on that part of the message and dose off. All ten of the virgins did.

Thank God for the fact of the trumpet! There will be a sign that will awake us as the moment approaches and we will all be aware... "Here is the bridegroom. Come and meet HIM." And if it is midnight all will turn on their devices to light the way. The virgins all trimmed their lamp wicks. But..... The wise have oil. The foolish do not. And the wise are not willing to share simply because the supply is limited and there is no agenda of instructions that tells us how long we will have to have light to see the way, as the King arrives.

Believe it or not there is a message here that pertains to the current plague, world wide pandemic, Covid-19. It is a message you have heard many times and it is a message you are probably tired of hearing. Public Health and our Premier and Prime Minister use phrases like "Don't Let Your Guard Down." I like the version that runs... "Keep your eye on the ball." Covid-19 has not gone away in spite of the fact that most of us hope that is what is happening. It is still a vicious little virus that will wreak havoc on the life of anyone who is careless within its reach. And because it is a virus, you cannot

see it to know it is within reach. The parable ends with Jesus advice for everyone of us in terms of HIS second coming. But the advice is also applicable in the time of this current plague. “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour (when the virus will be within reach).

We are in this together. Anyone who does not realize that is not only sleeping, they have lost the power of sight. We are also in this for the long haul. As long as it takes. Stay safe, keep watch. Let us pray;

Lord we know that you are going to come, when it is the right time, the right hour, the right day. We also realize that we are not going to figure that out no matter how hard we try to do so. We ask that YOU would be with us in the interim. Grant that we might remain safe in a world stricken with the plague of this virus. Grant us the faith needed to take each step along the way. Walk with us that we might have the courage to do YOUR will in trying times. This we ask in that name which is above all names: Jesus. Amen