

Matthew 25:1-13
November 12, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

Most of you know I love golf. The golf course is one of those few places I can leave everything behind, clear my mind, and find clarity while in the midst of God's abundantly beautiful creation. For me, golf is a spiritual discipline in many ways. I see God's handiwork surrounding me. Between shots, if playing alone, I talk with my creator. Sometimes pleas to ease the frustration that might come with the game of golf but most times conversation about whatever is on my mind and in my heart. Offering joy and thanksgiving or seeking wisdom, peace, or understanding. Seeking grace and love to provide fuel for the journey.

Many years ago, Amanda and I lived in Davenport. I was working at Menard's. The retail work schedule is anything but constant and often would find myself with time off when Amanda was working thus providing time to venture out to a nine-hole course I had found on the outskirts of town. Now normally, I am fairly accurate on the golf course – meaning I hit the ball straight and keep it out of trouble. I had quite a few golf balls in my bag that day; however, I soon learned something was amiss with my golf game. On the first hole my second shot found the water and so did the next. On the next hole, I hooked my driver out-of-

bounds and like a repeat of the first hole my second ball travelled virtually in the same line as my first. It didn't get any better - another ball in the water, one in the rough I couldn't locate, one in the weeds along a creek not found and by the seventh hole one ball was left in my bag and three shots later I was heading for the car as that ball decided it would rather be in the woods than the hole intended for it to find. The round was over. A day to forget or at least I hoped I would. Clearly, that day I wasn't prepared. I hadn't filled my bag with enough golf balls. I hadn't planned for the unexpected.

Being prepared seems to come through in our gospel text this morning. Like so many of Jesus' parables the message isn't readily apparent. Yet, set in its context we do learn a bit of what Matthew was getting out by including this parable – the only gospel to do so. Matthew places greater emphasis on discipleship than any of the other gospels. How we respond to the invitation to follow Jesus is of great importance. He spends three chapters (5-7) summarizing Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in which the Beatitudes of last week are found revealing the surprise that God's blessings often fall upon those society or the church has deemed stand outside of them. Jesus teaches things such as forgiveness, judging others, profaning the holy, prayer, stewardship of our gifts and particularly placing money before God and serving two masters. He also

announces the words we hear following baptism in which the newest disciple of Christ is made a part of the church, “Let your light so shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (5:17) And as chapter 7 draws to a close, perhaps all he has taught may be summed up by the 12th verse:

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

Discipleship entails receiving God’s grace and then responding to that grace.

Letting the fuel of that grace burn brightly through the darkness of the world for all to see the radiance and glory of our Lord. Yet, it appears that component was being tested in Matthew’s day and we also find it in our second reading from 1st Thessalonians. The unexpected delay of Christ’s return, which in the early church was thought to be imminent, had left many pondering how to live as people of faith in the midst of waiting. Some had given up hope and turned from that grace offered freely by Jesus. Some had fallen into living lives drastically different than the one Jesus offered. Some had wasted the fuel of God’s lavish generosity on things of the world to the benefit of themselves and the detriment of others. Some had wasted their oil on being consumed with trying to figure out when Christ would return even despite the repeated statements Jesus said that about

that hour no one knows. Some had even buried their gifts in the ground, thus rendering useless the oil of grace to the Christ lamp of mission and love for neighbor within them. This parable follows today's parable; hence, further emphasizing our parable this morning that how we burn oil of God's grace in the waiting for Christ to return does in fact matter. How do we prepare for this in-between time of the prayer we offer seeking God's kingdom to come upon us? While already here, it will not be fully complete until our Lord comes again. To take us to himself. To raise those who have died in the waiting, which is what the Thessalonian church was wrestling with and losing hope in. To fully rid evil from the earth. To bring about justice and rightly restore creation to a time in which there will be a new heaven and earth in which God will live among God's people and there will be no more crying and death will be no more. The eschatological messianic banquet all of the New Testament authors speak about in some form – Christ's return.

Today's parable raises some cautionary red flags. Who will be left outside the door knocking and saying, "*Lord, Lord, open to us*"? Will we be unprepared as they had been? We hear echoes once again of those 3 chapters in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as he draws to conclusion his teachings on discipleship and kingdom living with the words, "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 in heaven.” (7:21) Will we be foolish or wise with the oil of God’s extravagant grace? Will we receive it, cherish it, rejoice in it, pray for it, give thanks for it, and then use it rightly and faithfully steward it to bear forth the light it was intended to radiate?

Because note, in order for our lamps to burn with that oil we must first be filled with that oil. We must first receive that oil from the one the oil flows forth from. We must let the Holy Spirit’s workings of belief and faith take root and then trust in the promise that the eternal springs of that oil will fuel our lamps time and time again as we return to the waters of baptism, the table of Lord, and be filled with the fuel of God’s living word as we hear it and read it. It is not up to us to determine who will be the ones left out pleading “Lord, Lord” but we hold firm to the promise we don’t have to be consumed with the angst of worrying, the fear of standing outside, the impossibility of creating our own oil, and the guilt of being forgiven when we use it unwisely. No, the oil is a gift for us to grab hold to, fill our vessels with, and free ourselves from searching endlessly for the fuel of life. It’s ready and available. It’s abundant and free for all. We are to rejoice in its offering. Pray for the guidance and wisdom of how to use it as God intended. Give thanks for the freedom this oil rich in grace brings. Freedom that calls us to

respond. This is our preparation. Responding to the vastness and abundance of that oil of grace freely given by faithfully stewarding it and living out the life of discipleship Jesus invites and calls us into.

How do we steward this oil as the people of Christ at Bethany? How might we use that oil to fill the lamps of others who have not yet found that oil or turned from the gift of receiving that oil? Where do we need to be filled with that oil again and again so that our lights can shine brightly for the world to see? As we ponder these questions and live in the midst of Christ's long awaited return may we rejoice in the Lord always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us. Amen.