

Sermon – Matthew 25:1-13; Amos 5:18-24
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“Fueled by Faith, Burning for Justice”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Eight months ago, when pandemic living was new and this didn't look it would last very long, it became my job to be the family member who left the house. Erika and the kids didn't leave our house or yard for weeks, but every Sunday morning, I would come to Grace to lead worship via livestream, with Pastor Costello and our amazing audio-visual crew. And, several mornings each week, I would get up at 5:30 so that I could be at the Jewel when it opened. Like a bold frontiersman, I would scavenge for whatever I could find. What would be the catch of the day? Bananas? Flour? Milk? Toilet paper? The goal was to be ready, to be prepared. The pandemic made us think in new ways. What would the days bring? What would be enough? Based on the slim contents of the store shelves, we were not the only ones with this mindset. We started asking a question that most of us, due to our relative wealth, don't usually have to ask: Did we have enough to last?
2. This was a question that apparently only crossed the minds of some of the bridesmaids in Jesus' parable today, which presents us with an odd scenario – and not only because ten bridesmaids seem to indicate a larger-than-necessary bridal party. Questions abound. One might ask, why didn't the five foolish bridesmaids think to pack extra oil? Why did they take a nap instead of remaining vigilant? Why, for that matter, didn't the wise ones share? On the other hand, one wonders why the bridegroom was so late to his own

- wedding. Why does he not recognize them? And why, even if he doesn't recognize them, does he not let them in anyway?
3. Like all of Jesus' parables of judgment, this one paints the uncomfortable picture that there is, or will be, a moment of crisis; a dividing line between when we still have time to prepare and when that time will have run out. There is a time when the door to the party stands open and a time when it will be shut. What are we to do? Stock up on lamp oil, hoarding it so that others cannot have it, and staying fearfully awake throughout the night lest we miss the coming of our Lord?
 4. It seems an odd message given the thrust of our passage from Amos today, never mind the arc of the prophets in general. Amos prophesied to the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel during a time of relative peace and prosperity. Business was booming and life was good. Well, it was good for the people for whom it was good. But underneath a rosy surface was a rotten reality. The wealth of the well-to-do was earned through unfair treatment of the poor, and no amount of religiosity could cover up this sin. For those who stole from, rather than shared with, the poor, the coming of the Lord was nothing to look forward to. It would be like fleeing a lion only to run headlong into a bear. No, Amos said; a great wave of justice was coming, a flowing stream of righteousness that would cleanse the people of the injustice of inequality. So is Jesus now suggesting that inequality is a good thing? That the haves should withhold what is needed from the have-nots?
 5. The answer can only be no. In this last week of Jesus' life, as he nears his own moment of crisis and crucifixion, Jesus is not speaking of whether or not one should share actual lamp oil; he is not speaking here of worldly goods at all. The parabolic push moves us to ponder where we find our hope for salvation and life, and it is in Christ alone. What matters is whether or not the bridegroom knows us. He will know us based on whether or not we have kept watch in the night; whether or not we have kept our lamps burning with

the oil of faith. Jesus is not saying that we shouldn't share. He is saying that, in the end, each of us will have to stand before him in faith, and no one can do that for someone else. Amos foretold that the coming Day of the Lord was nothing to look forward to; indeed, at this point we might be left wondering, in the dark night of the soul, whether we have faith enough for the moment that will come. Have not we let our lamps of faith run dry and flicker out? Have we not slept when we should have been awake?

6. Yes, we have. We have failed in these ways. And it is precisely to this realization that Jesus drives us today. We are not, on our own, like the five wise bridesmaids. We have not kept faith perfectly in God. Neither have we fulfilled the call of the Law and the prophets to care as well as we should for the least of these in our midst. We show up late to the party and find the door already barred to us. The bridegroom comes and says, "I don't know you." But notice: While this is where the parable ends, it ends unresolved. Jesus says that the bridegroom doesn't recognize them; he doesn't say that the door remains closed. As is so often the case, the teaching of Jesus is not encapsulated in the parable itself but is brought to fruition in that to which the parable points. Jesus, days before his dying, points us to the cross. In his death, Jesus becomes God's presence standing with those in the night; those on the wrong side of the door; those shut out of life by sin and death and evil; those whose lamps have flickered out. Jesus dies with them and for them, with us and for us. But death cannot contain the life of the world. The tomb bursts open and with it the doorway to the wedding feast of the bridegroom is opened forever. The parable points to a party, and while it is no doubt true that any bridesmaid, groomsman, or invited guest has the foolish right to stay outside, Jesus has opened the gates to all. All he asks is that, by grace, we believe. He's even given us oil, anointing us in baptism with his own cross, by which he promises to always recognize us. Even and especially when the night is darkest. Come to the door. You will find welcome for the sake of the Son of God.

7. Here, in the grace of God that promises resurrection with Christ and reconnection with the saints who have gone before us, we find the promise and the power to hear and act upon the words of Amos. These are words we need to hear during these times of division. Though it took most of the week, Joe Biden has been declared the next president of the United States. If you are voted for him, this is good news. If you voted for Donald Trump, it no doubt seems less good. Either way, remember that while elections are of great importance and consequence, our lives and our hope are found elsewhere, somewhere more secure. Beyond the unity to which we aspire in this nation is the promised reality that we are already drawn together in Christ. We neither gained nor lost a savior this week. That's still Jesus, and we are those who have been welcomed to his party in spite of our sin and faithlessness. We are now those who, sins forgiven and lamps burning brightly, are sent into this world for Jesus' sake. To share the gospel and to share worldly goods with those in need. There's been a lot of talk lately about hopes for a blue wave or a red wave to sweep this nation. Neither really happened, and that's okay. What we need today is what Amos spoke of, a just and righteous wave to sweep across land and people, washing away both sin and suffering, leaving grace and mercy, abundance and equality for all people in its wake.
8. You and I are marked with oil. You have enough. There's no need to hoard the gift. The light of Christ burns within us by the power of the Holy Spirit who helps believe, even when the world is dark. So, in this world of injustice and inequality, of oppression and suffering, burn brightly for the sake of Christ. Let others know that the party is started and that they are welcome. We would be unrecognizable on our own. We are clothed now, however, in Christ. Keep watch, therefore. Not because you might miss out on the party, but because you don't want to miss the opportunity to shine forth the goodness and the justice of God for others. May your lamps overflow. May the lifegiving waters of God cleanse this land, this world, with justice and

righteousness for all people, even as we keep watch for the celebration of the eternal Kingdom to break out once and for all. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.