

Old Testament: Daniel 7: 9 - 14

New Testament: Matthew 25: 1 - 13

Please pray with me. And now Lord God may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Jesus is alive! Then, as a member of Triune Godhead, Jesus' being alive means that God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is alive. This is due to the Triune Godhead being *homoousios*, Latin for "of the same substance", as established at the Council of Nicea in 325. This alive-ness of God is identified as God's dynamism; though God is not changing, God is moving and shaking. God is full of life and energy. All this to say that God gives new insights and wisdom and praise be for that. Who else here has, historically, read through our parable today and scratched their heads and thought to themselves "what in the heck is this all about?". Well, I hope to share my new found clarity and understanding, thanks be to our dynamic God, with you all today.

I want to contend that this parable specifically speaks into *both* our yearly preaching theme of fear not *and* our Lenten theme about the kingdom of God which has primarily been about improving our self-awareness of our own actions. In last week's parable we heard distinctly and clearly from God that the invitation to the kingdom of God, the wedding feast, is sent to all; without exception. The original party guests got a reminder. When they still refused to come the king sent servants (disciples) out everywhere and told them to bring in anyone and everyone, good and bad, and prepared them for the feast with an appropriate garment. Some either refused to wear, or were unaware enough to put on said garment and subsequently shocked to find themselves not welcome at the feast (the kingdom of God). And this was the culmination of three weeks of, perhaps, some frustration and consternation from you all. We so desperately want easy, clear, black and white answers! Is it Jesus in your heart by God's grace that "gets us into heaven" or do I have to earn my way there and if so, what are those steps? Come on Eddie, make it simple and straightforward! Which is it? And once again I find myself offering my favorite response and some of y'all's least favorite response. Which is it? It is both. It is fear not *and* keep alert.

"Now these three remain, faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these is love." (1 Cor. 13) The reality of our hope secured in the resurrection of Jesus thereby defeating death is what enables me to say to you "fear not!". "Where, O Death is your victory? Where, O Death is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15 citing Hosea 13) Truly, with death defeated, what can man do to me? Fear not! Though you may die, yet may you live! This is by grace. It is not of your own doing. The faith of Jesus has accomplished this amazing thing. We are not alone. We are not forsaken. Fear not! This all sounds

great! Amen. Sermon over. Except that the greatest of these is love. So if hope assured is what allows us to say fear not, then it must be love that allows us to say, keep alert! All the bridesmaids in our parable were invited to the wedding. They were all invited to walk with the bridegroom; his cousins, sisters, nieces, etc. They all had reason to hope. They all had reason to fear not. When you love someone, truly love someone, you're alert to their wants and needs; right? You're alert to their moods and mannerisms. You're alert to when something is right, and you're alert to when something is wrong. And you're ready to do anything at a moment's notice. It would seem that what Jesus is alluding to is that some of the invited bridesmaids were not truly loving of the bridegroom and as such we're not alert to what all would be needed upon his arrival, whenever that might be. Here's how R.T. France puts it in his commentary: "But the point is simply that readiness, whatever form it takes, is not something that can be achieved by a last-minute adjustment. It depends on long-term provision, and if that has been made, the wise disciple can sleep secure in the knowledge that everything is ready"¹. Love is a life lived preparing for the hope that has been secured. Hope secured does not mean we do not live while we wait; does not mean we do not prepare while we wait. Love compels us to live in our hope, now. Love compels us to keep alert as we continue to prepare for Messiah's return. Love compels us to produce good fruits while we wait. That's why the greatest of these is love. In his commentary, Frederick Dale Bruner is even more blunt. "The decision to be a Christian, but not *too* much (which is close to the heart of this parable's meaning), will be described as a sa stupid decision ... a mindless coziness with the Lord and feelings of warm devotion toward him ("Lord, Lord," v.11) are dangerous if we think they substitute for obedience to Jesus' ethics."²

This draws us back to our conversation from previous week's parables about fruit. What kind of fruit are we producing? Fruits of faith in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit lived out in a lifestyle marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? This is the call. And this flies in the face of those who would ascribe to a death-bed conversion experience or those who would ascribe to having as many people as possible accept Jesus into their hearts. While God's love is effusive in its being offered to anyone and everyone, we must *not* be under the false impression that God is not also a judge. The new covenant is this reckless love that led Jesus to a cross of crucifixion *and* an expectation that those who truly receive this love *will* yield fruit for the kingdom of God. We keep alert by going about the work necessary to continually be yielding the kind of fruit that is fit for God's kingdom. And make no mistake; according to today's parable, and all the

¹ France, R.T. The Gospel of Matthew in The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Gordon D. Fee, editor. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI; 2007. p.949

² Bruner, Frederick Dale. Matthew: A Commentary, The Churchbook Matthew 13-28; Revised and Expanded Edition. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI; 1990. p.544.

parables we've studied and will study this Lenten season, we will be judged accordingly.

Fear not! The love of God is steadfast and never ending. Keep alert! God expects us to reflect this steadfast, never ending love to a world in desperate need of a Savior; whether the world recognizes that need or not. Amen.