Sermon – Matthew 25:1-13
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Grace Lutheran Church
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"Don't Be Late!"

Friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I was not ready for this moment, and it's possible I never would have been fully ready, but sometimes events break upon us unbidden. It seems that my mentioning a soccer trophy in a sermon several weeks ago got my father wondering why he still had so many of my childhood possessions in his basement. They are there no longer. Regardless of my readiness, boxes upon boxes showed up at my house a few days ago. The detritus of childhood is remarkable. From trophies and books to G.I. Joes and puzzles, I suddenly had a surfeit of stuff. Tucked into one of the boxes were several Boy Scout uniforms, the ones I'd worn in my last year of Scouting. Considering how unready I was to receive all of this, it was a bit on the nose to be reminded of the many times I'd enthusiastically assented to the Scout Motto: "Be Prepared." If you know me well, you know that I delight in being prepared and punctual; nevertheless, one can never quite be ready for all things at all times. Unpreparedness is a mark of the human condition. Whatever our intentions, we waver and grow weary.

2. Today, we hear the first of three parables in Matthew 25, parables of judgment and warning that mark the end of Jesus' teaching ministry. The parable is straightforward enough, at least on one level. Jesus wants his listeners to know that he is going away, and may be delayed in returning, but the wise among them will remain faithful. They'll be prepared. And, with

plenty of oil they'll be ready for whenever he returns. But woe to the foolish! If they – you! – are not ready for his return, you just may find yourselves on the wrong side of eternity's locked door. The bridegroom, overjoyed at his wedding, won't even be able to remember those who desperately knock at the door. With the crisis of the cross about to break upon him, Jesus wants us to know that his death and resurrection mark the turning point of everything; his return will change everything, and we dare not miss out. We may even note, with a bit of trepidation, that we are hardly prepared. The words of the prophet Amos echo across the centuries, calling us out of complacency. Have we done all we could do to help justice and righteousness flow? Or are we about to be caught out, lamps empty?

3. As we turn the parable about, there is more that begins to reveal itself, and questions bubble up. For one thing, it is a hard thing for these five who are left out. After all, they were no more sleepy than the other five. It's hardly their fault that the bridegroom couldn't be bothered to show up on time for his own wedding. And while they are perhaps correct that their extra oil would not be enough to go around, the first five simply seem unconcerned about the others and what may happen to them. And who, one wonders, locks the doors at a wedding reception? The parable is only part of the story.

4. Three days after this, Jesus will be put to death. The party ends with his body laid in a tomb, lifeless. The stone will be rolled into place, as good as a locked door. Except, of course, this will not be the end, for all ends are ended in the resurrection. Jesus, alive, steps back into our broken world. And you'll note that the risen Christ does not return to his friends saying, "Time's up, fools." He returns speaking peace, offering forgiveness, and promising his ongoing presence. The locked door of the parable speaks to our reality. We have fallen short. We have missed out. The cross and the empty tomb answer that reality, the death with which we live opening back up to the life that God intends for us.

5. Alive again, how are we now to live? Like many of you, I'm sure, I stayed up a bit too late this past Tuesday, watching election returns roll in. Many of you, I know, were overcome with joy as the blue wave washed over the country. And some of you, I know, were not. But we are all people who know and are known by God, and our task is not simply to vote. That would leave us in a similar position of the people in Amos's day. They went to worship but then returned to business as usual. Let it not be so for us. May we not simply worship for an hour each week and call it good. May we not vote and then disengage. We stay awake and prepared by working for justice and righteousness now, even as we await justice and righteousness to fully arrive as flowing waters and mighty streams on the day of the Lord's return. Trim your lamps and get to work, for we are called to light the way for others. You have been marked with all the oil you'll ever need; marked by the cross, sealed by the Spirit, sent to work for justice and peace.

6. As we gather this morning, we hear again just how surprising the gospel is. Yes, it is Jesus alone who can open the door for us, and we must do all we can to be ready, awake, alert. And yes, it is Jesus who will overturn the verdict when we sin and stray and fall asleep. In what is probably my favorite passage in his work, Robert Farrar Capon wites this: "When all is said and done – when we have scared ourselves silly with the now-or-never urgency of faith and the once-and-always finality of judgment – we need to take a deep breath and let is out with a laugh. Because what we are watching for is a party. And that party is not just down the street making up its mind when to come to us. It is already in our basement, banging on our steam pipes, and laughing its ways up our cellar stairs. The unknown day and hour of its finally bursting into the kitchen and roistering its way through the whole house is not dreadful; it is all part of the divine lark of grace." Jesus calls us to be ready for his return, but perhaps what he really wants is for us to hang on to the promise. A cause not for fear, but for hope in the night. Less, "I'm

> coming, be worried," and more "Don't worry, I'm coming." And wouldn't you know it, he shows up in the meantime. In the needs of our neighbors and in the eucharistic feast which is set, a foretaste of the unending wedding feast of the Lamb. You won't want to miss it! And you won't. The locked door will open, and Jesus will never forget who you are. For you are alive in him, and he knows his own. Come on in. Amen.

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