

Have you ever been driving along and one of those myriad of lights on the dashboard of your car lights up? Maybe it's accompanied by a ring or tone to also get your attention. It's getting your attention about something you may not have noticed otherwise. Maybe it's something simple like the gas is getting low. Maybe it's more serious like the engine is running too hot or the oil pressure suddenly dropped. Whatever the case, it's letting you know something you didn't know about but you'd better take some action or suffer the consequences.

One time I was helping my uncle do some work and he needed something from a local store. He sent me off to get it, telling me to use his car - which if I remember correctly was a 1980's something Mercury. Now everything on this on this old pile of junk made some sort of noise, except of course the horn. And none of the gauges worked either. So, when I climbed in, started the engine and saw the gas gauge remained firmly planted on "E" I thought nothing of it. I drove to the store, rattling, squeaking and banging all the way. I got the thing I needed and started heading back. As you can guess, along the way back the

squeaks and noise from the engine suddenly stopped, leaving only the rattles from the rest of the car to fill my ears. I started decelerating. I guess the gas gauge did still work!

This was the time before cell phones but as luck would go for me that day I ran out of gas within a couple hundred feet of a friend's driveway and I just coasted in. I called my uncle who came to meet me in his equally decrepit pick-up truck with a can of gas. And indeed, with gas in the tank, the gas gauge did move.

We don't have similar gauges for our lives as Christians as we live in the time before God's ultimate acts to bring creation to a close. We don't know how long that will be. We don't know what it will be like. Many people look for signs, but the Bible really teaches to not look for signs because they're probably wrong. There's no dash board of God's actions that we can look at and see how things are going. So our gospel writers like Matthew make sure we have teachings from Jesus to prepare us for living in the unknown.

The average driver driving down the Thru-Way has no concern about how the engine of his or her vehicle is doing. If there's no sign of distress they focus on other things. Jesus knew that with no sign of distress people would just drive through life with no focus on what God was doing either. And then, when it was too late, they would react.

It's been said many times that it doesn't matter how long God plans to allow creation to continue. Maybe its end will come in some dramatic way we cannot foresee. Or maybe it will continue on until the astrophysicists tell us it will eventually run out of energy. No one knows. Ultimately though, as far as you are concerned, your death is the end of the universe. It's too late after that, and there's no real predicting it.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids urges all to live faithfully every day. We can pretty easily interpret the features of the parable. The bridegroom is Jesus whose return appears to be delayed and his ultimate arrival time is unknown. Maybe it will be soon or maybe it won't be. The bridesmaids collectively are the church. They are a mix of people, some of them authentic disciples, some of them not. But the point is

they are all mixed together and one group is indistinguishable from the other until the end. When the bridegroom does arrive their differences are revealed, and it is too late to do anything about it. Those who thought they still had more time were tragically mistaken.

The oil, or having oil, meant living a life in keeping with God's will. Notice that both the wise and the foolish fall asleep. Preparation for Jesus' return is not about watching for signs, it is about faithful living.

The foolish bridesmaids' futile attempt to buy oil at midnight shows a scramble when it is too late. There were no all-night gas stations in Jesus' day.

If this parable unsettles us, that is good. It isn't intended to comfort anyone. It's intended to goad us into action.

We live in a society where universal salvation is the common belief. I come across a lot of people who believe in God

and they call themselves spiritual, and they have this basic theology. That while they aren't perfect, on the whole they are good people. And when they die they will go to heaven. And they leave it at that.

It's hard to evangelize to such a crowd. It's hard to bring them to a sense of urgency. If there is a dashboard of what God is up to, then to them we are like the gas gauge on my uncle's car - a meaningless indicator even if we are telling the truth.

Ultimately we have to remember this. This is God's world, God's church, and God's plans. God is merciful and gracious but God does not intend to be an enabler of unhealthy and destructive behaviors. While we speak of God's grace regularly in the Lutheran Church we also recognize God as judge. Martin Luther didn't fear the devil one bit. He didn't care. What could evil do to him? No, Martin Luther feared God. Sometimes in his life that fear was an unhealthy paralyzing fear. But most of the time it was a healthy fear which drove him to action.

Let us not sit back apathetically thinking that we are basically good people and because of that God will save us in the end. And let us not be content to let others do that either. This day and every day we do the works of God.

Here are some thoughts from commentator Eugene Boring, "Readiness in Matthew, is of course, living the life of the kingdom, living the quality of life described in [Jesus' teachings]. Many can do this for a short while; but when the kingdom is delayed, the problems arise. Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year when the hostility breaks out again and again, and the bridegroom is delayed. Being merciful for an evening can be pleasant; being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires preparedness.

"At the beginning of the life of faith, you cannot really tell the followers of Jesus apart. They all have lamps; they are all excited about the wedding; they all know how to sing, "Lord, lord." Deep into the night, when we spot some persons attempting in vain to fan dying flame to life, we begin to distinguish wisdom from foolishness." (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII, Pg. 451)

May we be wise, living faith every day in whatever form God calls it to take. May we not be weary when it seems like an uphill climb with no end in sight. And may we find joy and delight in God's work so that whether it be easy or whether it be hard, we find it satisfying so that we can joyfully and genuinely share the goodness of God with others. Amen