

24 November 2002
Last Sunday in the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Five Wise Virgins Lutheran Church”

Text: Matthew 25:1-13

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Names are important, and often carry with them significant meanings. People are often named after a parent or grandparent, or a Biblical figure. People sometimes change their names to reflect a change that has happened in their lives. . . . And in the same way, names of churches are important and significant too. A church may choose a name like Holy Trinity to reflect its confession. Many churches are named for saints of the Bible, like St. Paul, or St. Peter, or here, St. Andrew. And when you chose the name for our congregation, you did not take such a decision lightly. St. Athanasius was the great defender of the incarnation, and your choosing of that name reflects how important that is to you. . . . But if I may, I have never heard of a church named “The Five Wise Virgins Lutheran Church.” In fact, I have never heard of any church, of any denomination, by that name. I can think of a few reasons why, perhaps, that is! But I think it would be a good name, theologically. For by choosing that name, such a church would making a significant statement: that it is keeping its eyes not on the here and now, but on the end. That it is waiting, and watching, and always preparing for the Bridegroom to come. That the Day of Judgment is real, and not a fantasy. That the day is coming, although we know not when, when the wise and the foolish will be separated, and the door will be shut. Perhaps such a name would help us to keep focused and not to slumber; and remind us not to take our Lord and His forgiveness and His gifts for granted.

But as important as names are, they are not everything. And sometimes we betray our names. And so there are churches today named Holy Trinity whose teaching in fact *denies* the Holy Trinity! There are churches named for St. Mary whose teaching denies the virgin birth. And so it could also be with “The Five Wise Virgins Lutheran Church.” For how easy it is to grow tired of waiting, for our eyes to wander and become attracted to the ways and wisdom of the world, for the here and now to become more important than the return of Christ, our Bridegroom. How easy it is to grow tired of fighting for the truth of the Word, to grow tired of receiving the gifts, to want to lie down to rest and sleep, thinking that there will be ample time later. . . . But there may not be. We **“know neither the day nor the hour.”** When the Bridegroom comes, when Christ returns, will

we be ready, and not sleeping? Will there be a “Five Wise Virgins Lutheran Church?”

If not, some would blame Christ for this state of affairs, this uncertainty, claiming that He is taking too long to return. After all, if the Bridegroom would just have come sooner and not delayed, then all ten virgins in the parable would have entered in! That all were not ready is His fault. Why is he waiting so long? . . . In the Epistle we heard this same accusation, by those scoffing against Christ and His Church, saying, ***“Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”*** . . . But while our world considers those who keep others waiting as inconsiderate and rude, it is actually the mercy of God that is demonstrated in His delay. For as Peter continues in the Epistle, ***“The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”*** And so it is a merciful God who delays, so that more may hear His Word, more may receive His gifts, more may enter into His banquet. There still is room.

And far from deserving blame, what is there that Christ has not done for His Bride, His Church, and for each of us? He has done all that is needed. He has chosen us, not because we are the best and the brightest or the most beautiful, but purely out of undeserved love and mercy. He has laid down His life for us, taking all of our sins upon Himself so they would not be upon us, and dying our death that we might live His life. He cleansed us by ***“the washing of water with the Word,”*** that we might be ***“without spot or wrinkle or blemish, but holy and perfect.”*** (Eph. 5) He has given us His body and blood to eat and to drink, to sustain us and nourish us and keep our eyes focused on Him until He comes. He has lavished His gifts upon us, for there is nothing that He would not do for His Bride. He is the Bridegroom *par excellence*, asking His Bride only to wait; to wait a little longer; until all have come, so that all may enter. Wait, and watch, He says. I am coming. I am coming soon. And as His Bride we acknowledge His promise as we pray, ***“Amen! Come Lord Jesus! Come quickly!”***

But for this waiting it is the world who calls us foolish. And probably, the five wise virgins in Jesus’ parable were considered foolish as well. Ridiculed by the others for lugging around those extra jars of oil. How silly they were to be so concerned with having enough, and running back and forth to the oil shop all the time. Perchance they were even told to loosen up a bit and have a good time while waiting, and not be so rigid, not be such killjoys! We’re all going to get in, after all. . . . How like the world we live in today, which considers the Bride of Christ, the Church, quite foolish. Foolish for believing in a judgment, foolish for being so concerned with the things of God, foolish for not loosening up and enjoying ourselves more. Foolish for being so concerned with the truth. Foolish for spending so much time in the Word, and for spending so much time

receiving the gifts of God in His Divine Service, filling ourselves with the oil of His Word and love and forgiveness and faith all the time. Foolish Christians! Can't you see what you're missing? Can't you see how silly you are being? Don't be so serious! We're all going to get in, after all. . . . And how sad to see sister churches around us listening to those worldly voices . . . and following . . . and compromising . . . and in danger.

For the night is coming when the foolish and the wise will be separated and seen clearly by all. The wisdom of those now thought foolish, and the foolishness of those now considered wise will be evident, as the wise enter into the wedding feast of Heaven, while the foolish are shut out. So ***“Watch!”*** Jesus says. Be sober and vigilant. Making the most of every opportunity. ***“For you know neither the day nor the hour.”***

But be clear about what this means, to ***“Watch!”*** It does not mean that we have our head in the clouds, but neither do we have our head in the things of this world. It is rather to see things with godly wisdom and from a godly perspective. And so yes, we enjoy the things of this world and the blessings that God has given us, but not living for them or loving them in an idolatrous way, but using them in godly wisdom. And yes, we live in this world and enjoy the life that God has given us, though knowing in godly wisdom that while we are in this world we are not of this world. And yes, we watch our doctrine and the Gospel and strive to remain faithful, but not as an end in itself! But in godly wisdom contending for the truth for the benefit of all, proclaiming the truth to those who now consider themselves wise, but who are foolishly turning away from God and toying with His salvation. For now there is still an abundance of oil, more than enough, for all. The forgiveness of sins purchased and won by our Saviour through His atoning death on the cross is for the whole world. The truth of His Word is proclaimed throughout the world. The Bridegroom is present on altars throughout the world as He gives His body and blood into the mouths of the wise. He is still calling and inviting all to His feast. It is not yet midnight. There is still time. There is still room.

But time is running out. With each day that goes by we are one day closer to the day of Christ's return, when the call will go out, the trumpet will sound, and the wise will enter into the Feast of Heaven. On that day will be the new heavens and the new earth of which Isaiah prophesied. No more tears. No more sorrow. No more pain. All things made new. . . . Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, keep your hearts focused on that. Not on the frail and fleeting pleasures of this world, but on the everlasting joys promised to you in the world to come. And do not grow tired of waiting, but know that you do not wait in vain. Do not tire of the fight, but know that you do not fight in vain. And do not lose heart when you are persecuted or called foolish in this world, but know that the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world, and that in the end you will be seen as who

you truly are – a member of “The Five Wise Virgins Lutheran Church.”

So come again and receive the gifts of your Lord. Come and receive the foretaste of the feast to come, for as you here kneel in repentance and faith, your Bridegroom comes to you even now and is preparing you to receive Him when He comes again in glory. He has promised, and He is faithful. *“Amen! Come Lord Jesus! Come quickly!”*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.