11-12-17

Oil for my Lamp

Joshua 24: 1-3(a), 14-25 1 Thess. 4: 13-18 Matthew 25: 1-13

RR: Psalm 78: 1-7

**Summary:** **We are not simply a religion of believing and belonging; at its heart, Christianity is a religion of transformation**

Joshua says something very disconcerting that appears to challenge our assumptions about God. At the national dedication ceremony at Sechem, he asks everyone to decide who their God is. “As for me and my house,” he says, “we will worship the Lord.” He chooses “I am,” the Living God, and all the people echo his choice.

 Then comes the hard part. “You may not be able to serve the Lord,” he cautions. “He is a holy God and will not forgive your sins. He will tolerate no rivals.”

Wow. Joshua Says that sin, any sin, is an idolatry placed higher in importance, when committed, compared to what God wants. Furthermore, Joshua says that God will not forgive our sins.

This appears to contradict what we know about God. We know God does forgive sin and we know at what cost. Yet, though Jesus is come to save, not a jot or tittle (not the dotting of an “I” or the crossing of a “t”) will be taken from the law. Forgiveness does not change the fact that God will have nothing to do with sin.

Here is the blunt truth: sin is not covered over or overlooked at the Cross. Sin is nailed to the Cross and it dies there with Jesus. And, when Jesus rises, sin stays dead. That is in the hymn we will sing later: “My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought; my sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the Cross and I bear it no more! Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!”

Now, that is transformation. People think that if they believe, they belong, but that is only true if they have been made new beings in Christ. The Christians were not called “Christian” at first; originally, we called ourselves, “Followers of the Way.” More than simply believing in Jesus and spreading the news, these people followed Jesus’ example and submitted their own desires about how they should live to God’s will.

“Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus,” Paul advises the Philippians. “Although he was in the form of God, Jesus did not usurp God’s place but, rather, submitted to God and was obedient, even unto death on the Cross.” Jesus said and did nothing on his own, but said that everything was given to him by God.

In contrast, Americans value independence and distrust submission. The trouble is that, by following our own desires, those desires become rivals of God. When he wrote a book called “The Great Divorce,” C. S. Lewis wrote a preface that said: “I do not think that all who choose wrong roads perish, but their rescue consists in being put back on the right road. A wrong sum can be put right, but only by going back till you find the error and working it afresh from that point, never by simply going on.”

So many of us take our baptism as grace and then just go on repeating the same errors, worshipping the same false gods instead of allowing that grace to make us different people. As the Thessalonians learned, this is a matter of life and death.

Consider the parable in today’s Gospel. The wisdom of the five wise virgins was not their alertness: all ten slept. Their wisdom was not their chastity: all 10 were virgins. The wisdom was not the light, for the last five finally came with lit lamps, but they were too late. The difference was in five girls’ readiness; ***they were in the light when the bridegroom arrived***.

That leads to Jesus’ moral: *“Watch out then, because you do not know the day or the hour.”* It will be easy to pick the right god when only one is proven to have been real. However, we need to do this now, when all the other ways still clamor for our attention. Further, we need to keep to that choice every moment. There was a Sunday school chorus about this parable which I learned when I was young.

“Give me oil in my lamp; keep it burning, burning, burning. Give me oil in my lamp, I pray. Give me oil in my lamp; keep it burning, burning, burning. Keep it burning till the break of day!”

The oil of faith is not my own, it is given to me when I pray. As another hymn says, “I need Thee every hour.” Only by renewing my faith constantly will that lamp be burning when the bridegroom comes, even if I should fall asleep in the meantime.

Be, then, transformed by your faith and live as a citizen of heaven even in the streets of the City of Destruction so that you will not be lost when Heaven is the only place to live. As our brother Lynn Gedraitis says, “Let’s leave the light on!”