

Homily
November 12, 2023
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
26:00 – 36:26

You can't see the forest for the trees!

Have you ever been accused of that? Forest. Trees. 70% of us will look at the trees, the cobwebs, the little crawly things, the ravens, the bushes, the dead leaves, the rotting trees – and forget we're in a forest. It's just the nature of things. We see the details. We don't see the larger vision.

Do you do that? No? You're lucky.

I'm very good at it. Why do I mention forests and trees? Because, my brothers and sisters, our parable today from the first part of Chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel account is loaded with trees that distract us from the larger meaning.

What is the "forest" here? The forest here is the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God – same thing. It is the forest. It is the overarching reality for all parables. And then there's a secondary one: the wedding feast. Boy. They went to a lot of trouble for a wedding feast, especially those ten virgins.

The wedding feast. That can kind of trips us up. But basically, it's the "end times." It's the coming of the Lord – the apocalypse. The end of all time, where God will gather all of his people together.

And now, the trees. Or the weeds, or whatever...the rotting log that stinks, that distracts us: oil and lamps. Those are two of the trees that can get in our way of seeing the larger meaning.

These ten virgins have lamps. Why? That's part of the ancient world's attending to the bridegroom at a wedding feast. It's not misogynist, I promise you. That's just what they did in that culture and time. And because the bridegroom was coming at night, they needed lamps to see and to greet him.

We get stuck on those lamps because we don't go around carrying lamps, do we? (What do we carry, Hugo? Nothing?) Out in the dark in the woods...a flashlight! So what is this "lamp" thing? It's

“oil,” probably in a ceramic, handmade container, with a wick. Or a metal container with a wick. It is to light the way.

Oil, too, would be in a container because you need the oil to light the lamp. Right?

What’s the difference here? Well, five remembered that they needed more than what they had. For the flame to continue, they needed more. The other five, they didn’t bring any. You kind of wonder why they didn’t, but they didn’t.

Oil. Lamp. There’s got to be a deeper meaning here, right? It’s not just about a wedding, right? It’s not just about the groom and lighting the way.

No. The deeper meaning, for the community of believers that heard this – especially Matthew’s community – what do you think the light would be? I would suggest it is “baptism.” Didn’t you receive a light at your baptism? A candle. And weren’t you encouraged to carry that light throughout your life? Yes? (You’re very good. You’re very helpful this morning.)

But why the oil? Well, to keep the flame of faith alive in our hearts. In Jesus’ time. In Matthew, the Gospel writer’s time and our own time. It is to take and bring constant fuel to that baptismal light. And that fuel, as scholars will tell you, is how we live the Covenant.

Now remember this is Matthew’s Gospel account, right? So Jesus is the “new Moses.” He’s the new lawgiver for the New Covenant. What’s he suggesting here? Chapters Five, Six and Seven. The Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus reveals attitudes and behaviors that are for the Kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven – here on Earth, to move us toward that.

And throughout the Gospel, Jesus shows ways that are just as startling. Such as the fact that he took on Matthew, who was a tax collector, as a disciple. And he also shows in a later part of Chapter 25, what we’re to do. “I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink.” And even later, “Go and proclaim the Gospel.”

Brothers and sisters, that’s the oil that keeps the flame of faith alive in our hearts. It’s those actions, those deeds of our living the Covenant in Christ.

And so, if we’re going to “meet the bridegroom,” that is the Lord, and to be ready, we need both. So they’re not really trees, are they? They’re terribly important parts of the larger picture: the “forest” of our salvation.

Now, I've got to remember that third one. (Thank you. The groom! You're very helpful. – Are you sure it's the groom? Yes.)

The groom is the Lord. And he's there to lead us, to guide us. And to help us to celebrate the gift we've been given. And we do that in Sacrament, the Eucharist especially. In all of those moments when we gather for prayer together. Or we break open the Word together – the Scriptures. Or we take a look at our deeper traditions and try to understand that we might live through them. Why? Because of the Bridegroom.

Well, there are moments when we can't see the forest for the trees. It's understandable.

But today, Matthew gives us a clear account of what the Lord would have us do. Be prepared. Stay awake. Even though both the "wise" and the "foolish" fell asleep. - That's really the fourth tree. – (Now I've got four going.) He says, "stay awake!" But they fell asleep, all of them. No. He's saying, "Be prepared," in just a different metaphor.

Be prepared for the coming, with your lamp and with your oil.

I urge us this week: Take the time, please. Go back and reread the Sermon on the Mount and Chapter 25. And ponder, "Here's my lamp. Where's my oil?"

For the Bridegroom is coming.