

Sermon Notes November 12, 2023
Peace Lutheran Church
The Holy Gospel of Matthew 25: 1-13
“Following the Lessons for Today”

Amos, the eighth century BC shepherd from Tekoa in Israel, fearlessly criticized his people's religious fervor. They worshiped God enthusiastically while ignoring the needs of the poor. This sickened him.

The book of Amos has a hard message:

*If you can go to the church yet hate your neighbor, your religion is a sham.

*If you can go to church yet not care about the stranger, your religion is a sham.

*If you can worship yet not care about children, your religion is a sham.

*If you can worship yet not visit the sick, your religion is a sham.

The next three Sundays we have three great parables from Matthew 25: bridesmaids, talents, and sheep and goats. The traditional interpretation of this week's parable is that the delayed bridegroom is the delayed return of Jesus. The bridesmaids are the church, some of whom are prepared with enough oil for the long wait. The early church is expecting Jesus' return any minute. We hear Paul's urgent expectation of Christ's return in the second reading from 1 Thessalonians. We know something about waiting - waiting for Christmas; waiting to get a driver's license; waiting for graduation, marriage, or the birth of a child. Some waiting is hard -waiting for a job offer, waiting for a diagnosis, waiting for a loved one to die, waiting for a pandemic to be over.

What are we to do while we wait? This seems to be the question this text is addressing. The parable's answer is simple: keep your lamp lit and burning. But what does this mean? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand where it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5: 15-16). Good works! In Matthew the lamp is a metaphor for good works, bringing light and hope to the whole world. The prophet “famous Amos” would approve.

If the light is good works, what is the oil that keeps that light burning? What strengthens your faith? What fuels good works? I'll give you three suggestions.

*Faith: St. Augustine sees in burning lamps a burning faith that serves the neighbor in need. Faith is the oil that fuels the light of good works.

*Hope: Keeping oil in your lamp is keeping hope alive. When things are going badly, you really need to hang on to hope.

*Love: Again, according to St. Augustine, "Some great, some exceedingly great things doth this oil signify. Thinkest thou that it is not charity?"

Maybe we need all three oils to keep our lamps burning. While we wait for Jesus' return, we live in faith, hope, and love - free gifts from God that empower us to serve our neighbor. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (10: 23-25).

