

32ND SUNDAY OPF THE YEAR - A- 2005
“The Oil Shortage”

No one likes to be made fun of. No one wants to be the laughing stalk of others, especially of their peers. In fact, to avoid being seen a fool in the eyes of others is a commonly used motive to control behavior. When I was a kid, there was a saying that went, *“Fools’ names and fools’ faces are always found in public places.”* When I was tempted to write my name on a wall, or scratch my initials on a rest room stall, I’d think of this saying and that pretty well squashed that temptation. What if someone who knew me saw it, or figured out it was me that did it? They’d think I was a fool. Or when people are talking about stuff they don’t know anything about, its too bad they never heard the sage advice that says, *“It’s better to be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.”* Nobody wants to be made a fool of.

In today’s parable of the ten virgins, Jesus gives us a choice. We can choose between being wise or being foolish. It’s all pretty straight forward. The five wise virgins were ready when the bridegroom came, but the five foolish virgins weren’t. Like good scouts, the five wise took *“Be Prepared”* seriously. The five foolish didn’t.

Now, when the bridegroom arrives, the parable takes a somewhat surprising turn. It even bothers us. While both the wise and the foolish had fallen asleep, only the wise had enough oil in their lamps to go out and meet the bridegroom. So the five foolish ask them for some oil but are turned down. It sounds like the wise virgins are selfish, since they don’t share what they have. When the foolish virgins are gone buying some oil for their lamps, the bridegroom comes, the door is locked and the foolish ones are excluded from the wedding like strangers.

Now, since this parable is seen as allegory, the bridegroom being Jesus and the virgins being his followers, what is the oil? That is the key to understanding its lesson. This parable is not about staying awake as both the wise and the foolish fall asleep. It's more about what allows us to sleep in peace, without worry. In fact, the foolish were experiencing an oil crisis and they didn't know it. The oil represents faithful, active, obedient discipleship. It refers to the necessity we have to live out our commitment to follow Jesus faithfully, each day, and not in a hit-and-miss fashion. If we have an abundance of this oil, there is no need to be anxious about life. In fact, it allows us to enter into life, so we can sleep, relax and live life to the full. This parable is not about preparing for death as much as it is about knowing how to live. As we said on All Souls' Day, the saints were not afraid to die because they knew how to live.

My friend, Father Mike Schmitt, who died at 58, was not afraid to die. And the reason is because he was not afraid to live. He savored life like hot stew on a cold day. This is what the kingdom of God is like; savoring life and living it to the full. On Sunday mornings in my neighborhood, occasionally I see a man doing calisthenics. That is good. But if he is trying to ward off death, in the long run, it isn't going to work. Along with good physical health we must work at good spiritual health.

Just like the healthy person who controls his weight by exercise and a good diet can't share his health with another person, the wise virgins couldn't share their spiritual health, their fidelity to God with the five foolish virgins. They have to take responsibility for that themselves. And so do we.

Some put it this way: "*Live each day as if it were your last.*" This does not mean live in fear. It means enter into life as fully as we can, using the gifts God gives us. And this does not mean eat, drink and be merry,

either. It means for us to follow Jesus with our whole heart and soul, stuff we've been talking about the last few weeks. It means loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. It is not by accident that in this same chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, which we hear next week, Jesus says to those who used their talents well, "*Well done, good and faithful servant. ... Come, share your master's joy.*" But of the one who buried his treasure, "*Throw the worthless servant into the darkness.*" And the week after next, we will hear, "*I was hungry and you gave me to eat, thirsty, and you gave me to drink.*" We will be separated like sheep from goats, which is just another way of saying that some will get into the wedding and others will be locked outside as strangers to Jesus; as others were excluded from the heavenly banquet because they were not properly dressed.

The issue is oil. And some of us are not even aware that we are in an oil crisis, and we drive through life enjoying our spiritual Hummers. When the time comes when we must answer to our Lord for our life, will I have enough oil? How will our excuses sound, the ones like, "*I was too tired, too busy, I had to work, or I couldn't afford it?*"

No one likes to be made a fool of. Fortunately, God doesn't want us to be fools either. As the Book of Wisdom teaches, wisdom is not only found by those who seek her, but wisdom even seeks us out. Is this why Jesus invites us to this Eucharistic banquet each week? So that he can help us overcome our foolishness by growing in his wisdom? What a gift the Eucharist is that we are about to offer and receive! What a blessing to know that Jesus hungers for us more even than we hunger for him.