WHAT WERE THEY THINKING? WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?

Matthew 25:1-13

The Apostle Paul had a greeting he used at the beginning of several of his New Testament letters and I greet you with that same greeting of blessing now... GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. AMEN (2 Corinthians 1:2)

The text for our message this morning is our Gospel lesson for today and since we heard it read before, I want to just read the first 4 verses again... (Matthew 25:1-13)

A while back there was a story in the Des Moines Register about a 19-year-old fellow named Robert Rickets. The story was about how Rickets was still alive but he was in bad shape because his head was cut and banged and bruised and bloody. And actually, according to the story, Rickets was fortunate to even still have a head. And the reason why is because for some reason Rickets had tried to see how close he could get his head to a moving train without getting hit. Rickets did get really close and it was so close his head ended up a bloody mess. And the question everybody who heard about this story wondered was WHAT WAS HE THINKING? What was going on in this 19-year-old brain that made Rickets think that putting his head next to a moving train was a good idea?

That question of WHAT IS HE OR SHE THINKING? is one which most of us have probably asked a few times in life as we heard about something going on around us. Lots of people seem to be doing a lot of dumb or stupid or crazy or wrong things which make us wonder WHAT ARE THEY THINKING?

Like for example these folks in another story. A student in high school had 2 classmates who decided they were going to get some money by robbing a convenience store like a Casey's. They wore ski masks and the robbery went very well. One thing the robbers did though, was they wore their High School lettermen's jackets which had their names on them. The convenience store clerk told the police what the guy's names were and the school they went to and the cops went and arrested them. WHAT WERE THOSE HIGH SCHOOLERS THINKING, PEOPLE WONDER, TO WEAR THOSE KINDS OF COATS FOR THEIR FIRST ROBBERY?

And, before we get too judgmental, what about ourselves? How many times have we done or said something which maybe made other people around us shake their heads and roll their eyes and go WHAT WERE YOU THINKING? Check out this picture of a hole that someone cut in

one of their doors so that their cat could come and go without someone to open and close the door. Good idea right? Except here is the picture of that same door when that person went to hang it back up. As you can see, they had the door upside down when they cut the cat hole. WHAT WERE THEY THINKING? And WHAT ARE WE THINKING when we do similar goofy and foolish things?

As I said, that question can get a workout in this world that we live in. And the reason why there are so many foolish and wrong choices being made in our world is because we live in a sinful and fallen world. The Bible tells us that we all are born sinful ever since Adam and Eve made the foolish decision in the Garden of Eden to eat the fruit of the tree God said not to eat from. What Adam and Eve were thinking when they munched on that forbidden fruit we don't know except that they were somehow wanting to be like God and be wise the Bible tells us (Gen.3:4-6). The WHAT WAS I THINKING consequences of their sin however, are still with us...

...Except now we have some help with that sin. We can be baptized, and we can have our sins washed away; and the Holy Spirit can put faith in our hearts so that we repent of our sins. And Jesus promises us He will take us to heaven if we keep that faith in our hearts. But the question is, will we do that? Will we keep our faith in Jesus or will we let our faith slip away? And if we run out of faith like the 5 virgins ran out of oil, are we going to end up asking ourselves WHAT WAS I THINKING as I missed out on heaven?

And this is the issue we want to look at today as we listen to Jesus telling the parable of the 10 virgins. Jesus tells this parable because He doesn't want anyone to not be ready for heaven. Judgment Day and getting into heaven is what this parable is about. And what Jesus does is connect Judgment Day to a wedding. And Jesus does this to help us so someday we don't end up asking ourselves WHAT WAS I THINKING that I wasn't ready and missed out on getting into heaven?

And so the first thing we have to realize is that the way they did weddings in Jesus' day was different than the way most weddings are done in our day. In Jesus' day the couple were considered married, and they were a husband and wife from the moment they got engaged. They didn't, however, start living together until they had a ceremony and then maybe a wedding banquet and maybe a party if they were going to have those things. And so, when the bridegroom and the bride were ready for the ceremony, they would announce the day but not always the time. That may seem odd but that is the way many couples did it. Wedding guests and some of the wedding participants would then just need to be ready that day for whenever the ceremony and reception were going to happen. The 10 virgins in Jesus' story were part of the wedding party and they had a special job to do and that's why they particularly needed to be

ready. The virgins' job in the wedding was to be like Alliant Energy. Since there was no electricity in Bible times the virgins were supposed to furnish light for the event if it happened after dark. The virgins were to bring their lamps and be ready to use them.

And what would happen is when the Bridegroom was ready, He would come in a parade through the streets with his friends shouting out, "Here I am, the bridegroom. Come and enjoy the feast prepared for you." And the bridegroom would then go to the home of his bride and get her and their friends and family would join them, and everybody would head for the banquet hall for the wedding ceremony and then the wedding feast and the party afterwards.

When everybody got to the banquet hall, the doors would then be closed and if you were running late and didn't get there in time, you would get locked out and you would miss out on the fun. And these were the rules and everybody knew them and this is just the way it was.

And what this means is that the virgins in this story should have all known what was going to happen. They should have all known that on the wedding day the bridegroom could come early or he could come late but they had to be ready for whenever he came. And these virgins should have known that if they weren't ready and the banquet doors were shut then they weren't going to get in.

For the 10 virgins to be ready, what they needed was oil in their lamps. And we know what happened in Jesus' story. 5 of the virgins were wise and brought extra oil with them in case the bridegroom was coming later after dark. 5 of the virgins were foolish, though, and didn't plan ahead and they brought no extra oil; and their lamps were empty when they heard the shouts up the street that the bridegroom was on his way. And by the time the 5 virgins left and went and bought more oil and got back, the wedding reception doors were closed and they couldn't get in.

And this is where we might ask the question, WHAT WERE THOSE 5 VIRGINS THINKING AS THEY GOT READY FOR THIS WEDDING? How would they think they were going to keep their lamps going without any oil? And, if nobody gets into the reception if they are late, how did they think they could come late and still get through the doors? The 5 foolish virgins definitely seem to deserve to be called foolish. We can certainly look at them and shake our heads and say WHAT WERE THOSE GOOFY GALS THINKING?

And so we go back to Jesus' reason for telling this story. And His reason is He wants all of us to be ready when He comes. And Jesus is coming for us. He is coming for everybody either on a day He decides will be our last day in this world; and it is time for Him to individually take us

to our eternal reward. Or Jesus will be coming for the last day of this whole world and that will be Judgment Day; and then we will all either go to heaven or go to hell.

Either way, Jesus calls Himself the Bridegroom; and He is coming and if we want to get into the heavenly wedding, we need to be ready. And what the oil in our lamp does is it makes us ready. And what the oil in our lamp is is faith in Jesus. The oil in the lamps of the virgins was the only thing they needed to be ready for the wedding and our faith in Jesus who suffered and died for our sins on the cross so we could be forgiven and go to heaven is the only thing we need also to get us through the banquet hall door. And if faith in Jesus is what saves us, then that is what we should be thinking about and not thinking about something else getting us through the pearly gates.

The 5 foolish virgins either weren't thinking at all or they might have been figuring that they could use some of their other 5 friend's oil to get into the wedding. And if that is what they were thinking, that was foolish and wrong thinking on their part. And the reason is we can't get saved by using someone else's faith. We can't get into heaven ourselves because we have a husband or wife who believes in Jesus. We can't get there because grandpa and grandma go to church or our best friend on the soccer team is a devout Christian. We each have to have our own oil of faith to get us there.

Years ago, when I was pastor at my first church over in Reinbeck, I visited a family who were supposedly Lutheran and had moved to town. I thought it might be a good idea if they joined our church and so I went to visit them. The family surprised me, though, and they said they were pretty ok with the Lord because there was a church in western Iowa which had their name on one of the stained-glass windows. Years ago, some of the family had donated that window and the family name had been added in one of the stained-glass panels as their gift to the Lord. The family I was visiting didn't feel like they needed anything more for getting into heaven. They didn't need repentance or faith or going to church or living for Jesus because the faith of their ancestors in buying that window was enough oil for all of them. That was their thinking. And my thinking was where in the Bible does it say anything like that? And there is no place. The faith of other family or friends cannot be a substitute for our own oil in our lamps. We are foolish if we think it can be.

Likewise, we are foolish also if we are like the 5 young ladies, and we think we are so good that the doors of heaven can be closed and yet when we show up God will make an exception and let us in.

God doesn't operate this way. In some of Jesus' last words He spoke before He ascended into heaven, He said, HE WHO BELIEVES AND IS BAPTIZED WILL BE SAVED BUT HE WHO

DOESN'T BELIEVE WILL BE DAMNED (Mark 16:16). Or another way of saying that is the persons who have oil in their lamps will get through heaven's door and the persons who don't will end up in a place similar to this picture. This is a hot, stinky, yucky trash dumpster similar to what we might imagine hell is like.

And by the way, what do you suppose the person was thinking who cleaned up their grill and emptied the coals that were still hot into this garbage can and let it catch on fire? WHAT WAS THAT PERSON THINKING? And were they even thinking at all or was the pause button maybe pushed for their brain?

Anyway, while we wait for Jesus to come again, there is something we might do to make God happy. And that is to be useful. One of the things the Gospel writer Luke says in chapter 12 (verse 35) is STAY DRESSED FOR ACTION AND KEEP YOUR LAMPS BURNING. What God is saying here is that we shouldn't just keep oil in our lamps, but we should keep our lamps lit and doing good. Likewise, we should keep our faith busy doing good for Jesus until He come again.

Someone who teaches about keeping our lamps burning is Dave Ramsey. Some of you have maybe heard of him. Dave Ramsey is the head of Financial Peace University; and he is a money guru who teaches about how we can manage our own money in such a way that we can be very successful. And as we are successful, we can often reach a point where we can say to ourselves, WHAT WAS I THINKING when I used to spend money like I did.

I watched a video of Dave teaching one of classes about using money God's way and he used an example from his own life. Early in his life as a Christian, Dave went through bankruptcy and doing things God's way with his whole family meant being generous and giving with whatever they had. And this was really hard and Dave's family lived in deep poverty.

And then one day, Dave had one of those WHAT WAS SHE THINKING moments with his 5-year-old daughter, Rachel. Rachel's teacher did an experiment in school with her students. The teacher asked the kids to draw a picture and tell what they would do if they were given $100.

The children did their sharing. Scott was going to use his $100 to buy a car that could change into whatever he wanted it to be. Allison was going to buy a doll house. Kathy was going to buy a regular house but one with a cat in it. Andrew wanted a swimming pool. And then Dave got to see his daughter's answer in the booklet she brought home. He got to see her answer and wonder just for a moment WHAT WAS SHE THINKING? But then he knew. And 5-year-old Rachel, who had grown up with hardly anything herself, wanted to give her money to a poor

family. And Dave said he cried. He cried that his little girl had learned so well how to make God happy with her caring and generosity. Rachel had oil in her lamp, and it wasn't just sitting there. It was burning. And Rachel was ready even at her early age for Jesus to come because of her faith.

May we each live the kind of lives which don't make people wonder and think how we can be so goofy or dumb or sinful and wrong. Instead, may people think about us and know because of our faith we are ready for Jesus to come whenever Jesus is ready to come for us. Amen.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.