

Luther on the Ten Virgins—and the Surprising Source for This

Colleagues,

This may look at first glance like one of the scantier posts you've ever gotten from Thursday Theology, but really, it's not. That's because the meat is tucked away in a link you'll get to shortly. Be sure to click on it. It will be your food for the week, thrown together by master chef Martin Luther and delivered to your inbox in solid English prose thanks to a surprising somebody that you don't know and won't have heard of until now.

Some background. I've been banging my head this week on Matthew 25:1-13, the Parable of the Ten Virgins. I plan to preach on it this weekend, as do a host of other pastors who follow the Revised Common Lectionary in one or the other of its denominational variants. That includes many of you, I suppose; and if I'm right in also supposing that you're as interested as I am in figuring how to use this text to deliver some good news from God to the people we'll be talking to, then your heads are hurting too.

Saying this, I'll resist the urge to tell you what the head-banging here has been all about. It will bog me down. If willing spirit triumphs for once over slow-moving flesh, I'll get to it in a week or two in connection with some ruminations about the last of Matthew 25's great images, the separating of the sheep and goats. What matters for now is the simple observation that the Gospel takes a beating when people start talking or writing about anything in Matthew 25. There are exceptions to this rule, of course—Robert Farrar Capon comes especially to mind—but these are few and far between. This week's scratching around in commentaries and websites, including ones that flash a Lutheran

label, left me uniformly gloomy. No one finds anything other than a looming threat in Jesus' point about the virgins. "Shape up. Or else." (Again, exceptions: see reflections by [Ed Schroeder](#), [Cathy Lessmann](#), and [Steve Kuhl](#) at our own [crossings.org](#).)

All this led me to wonder what Luther might have said about this parable. What books I have were lacking, so I hitched a ride with Mr. Google. He took me promptly to the very thing I was looking for, [a sermon by Luther on Matthew 25:1ff](#). So there it is, your reading for the week and the chief content of this post, by no means scanty or short on substance, as you'll see. And do see, because I'll bet my bottom dollar than none of you have run across it before. It's been available in English translation for scarcely a year, and even in German (or Latin?) it will have been deeply buried in the great heap of Luther's output.

Again, the link: [Luther on the Ten Virgins](#).

By way of quick prelude: the sermon was preached in Erfurt on October 21, 1522. I imagine Luther was still exulting in his release from the confines of the Wartburg Castle. In any case, the cause of that confinement, his condemnation at Worms, would have still been much in mind, so we shouldn't be at all surprised to find ourselves wading through a fair amount of his boilerplate invective about scholastic theology and papal opponents. When he finally gets around to digging into the parable, he uses it as a springboard for reflecting on the relationship between faith and good works. In the [model for studying texts](#) that we hype at Crossings, that means a focus on the connection between Steps 5 and 6, where the point is to ensure that God's work in Christ doesn't go to waste, but makes a leap into daily lives that resonate with trust and hope in God.

Luther puts it this way—and I think I’ll quote him on Sunday: “Therefore, let each one see to it that he has these two together: the oil, which is true faith and trust in Christ; and the lamps, the vessel, which is the outward service toward your neighbor. The whole Christian life consists in these two things: Believe God. Help your neighbor. The whole Gospel teaches this. Parents should tell it to their children at home and everywhere. Children, too, should constantly foster this Word among themselves.”

On a lighter note, when you get around to reading for yourself you’ll notice that the folks the folks at Erfurt who got to hear this sermon on the day it was preached were busy celebrating the Feast of the 11,000 Virgins. Again I’m betting bottom dollars that you’re as clueless as I was about that, so here’s the skinny on it, more than you ever wanted or needed to know about [St. Ursula and her companions](#). Thank you, Mr. Wikipedia.

Finally, a word of delighted surprise about how the sermon is available to those of us who are chained to English. When you click on the link—perhaps you’ve done that already—you’ll find yourself at the website of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Las Cruces, New Mexico. A bit of browsing there will reveal that Emmanuel was founded in 1987 as a Wisconsin Synod mission. Two years ago it left the Wisconsin Synod to affiliate with a recently formed entity called the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America (ELDoNA).

ELDoNA currently has seventeen pastors on its roster, one of whom is Emmanuel’s Paul Rydecki, translator of this sermon. When I wrote to thank Pr. Rydecki for making it available, he answered as follows:

“It was my pleasure to provide Luther’s sermon to those who may benefit from it, including myself. I enjoy translating from both

German and Latin and have published several items through Repristination Press (available on Amazon), most recently a series of 12 sermons by Aegidius Hunnius on the Table of Duties, as well as Johann Gerhard's commentary on Romans 1-6."

Go figure. Out of New Mexico, of all places, and from a pastor who finds that "the larger synods [e.g. Wisconsin] either do not confess the faith once delivered to the saints in unison, or that they confess in unison things that are contrary to that faith." That too is from Pr. Rydecki's note. After some glancing at the [ELDoNA website](#), I can't suppose that he and I would get through five minutes of conversation without rubbing each other's sensibilities raw, but still, there he is, a servant of the Lord blessing the Lord's Church and that little band of the Lord's servants who read Thursday Theology. And for that, thanks be to God, who surely keeps the holy angels in a state of constant merriment over the way he goes about delivering his gifts.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team