

“Keeping Our Faith Burning Brightly”

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March 15, 2015

New Testament Lesson: Matthew 25:1-13
Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 43:3-4

During our Good Friday service on April 3, we will be extinguishing seven candles, one for every utterance of Jesus from the cross on the day he was crucified. Even though all those candles in the sanctuary will be out at the end of the service, there will still be one lit candle giving off light – the Christ Candle.

The Christ Candle will be brought into the Sanctuary right before we leave as a symbol of the resurrection, which we celebrate most joyfully at Easter. What would happen if we didn't keep that one candle burning, the Christ candle? Would there be any reason to celebration on Easter Sunday?

Today's New Testament lesson is about keeping the light Christ burning in our lives. Jesus tells a parable – a story with a lesson – about five foolish bridesmaids who let the light dwindle and five wise bridesmaids who kept it shining brightly, come what may. It's a parable of the kingdom of heaven. “The kingdom of heaven will be like this,” says Jesus. “Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.” “When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.”

The kingdom of heaven represents both our coming into the fullness of Christ when we die AND the glimpses of heaven we get in the here and now. Both require faith, and not just a little faith, but faith in abundance.

What are some ways that we keep the faith burning brightly in our lives? Anybody ... what are some faith practices that we as a church or you as an individual maintain? ... Worship and prayer; ... How about Sacrificial giving and mission outreach; ... Gathering in the Spirit for Christian fellowship; ... Reading and learning from the Bible, embodying God's word. At the heart of each of these faith practices is worship. *Worshipping regularly* is central to who we are as Christians, as the church

Listen to the following description of the church, from the Book of Acts (ch.2), one of the earliest descriptions we have:

“Day by day, as they spent much time together *in the temple*, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and *generous hearts, praising God* and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

See how spending time in worship leads to Christian fellowship and generosity both at home and out in the community – breaking bread together with generous hearts and having goodwill for all people.

Worship is the fuel that energizes our lives as Christians. And yet, about 60% of young people stop going to church as they become young adults...¹

According to a report by the Association of Religion Data Archives, among young people age 15 to 17 whose parents attached little importance to religion, only 1% carried any significant faith practices into their mid to late twenties. In contrast, 82 percent of children stayed religiously active as young adults if their parents talked about faith at home ... and were active in their congregations. "Historically," says author Alan Rudnick, "families have handed down family traditions for thousands of years. Now, faith practices and beliefs are considered to be too indoctrinating for children." So, we leave it up to them.

Let's look for a moment at how this church passes along the faith. Pull out your worship bulletin and look at page 3. What does it say at the top? That's right, "*We Gather* in Response to God's Call." Church is where we come in response to God's call to worship. Then on page 4 it says "*We Listen* for God's Word." This is when we are replenished by the Holy Spirit – the lamp oil – that will give us spiritual energy and fuel for the days ahead. And lower on that same page, "*We Respond* in Joy and Gratitude." Here, we are sent out into the world, inspired and equipped for ministry on behalf of Jesus Christ.

Each week, we follow this simple pattern, gathering in response to God's call, bathing in the Holy Spirit – the living Word of God – and responding by sharing it with others in how we live our lives. Well, I say each week. But we know that's not entirely true. Not everyone comes to worship on a regular basis. And there are some who don't come to worship at all.

This is the danger Jesus is warning us about when he says, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Jesus is calling us to keep the light of our faith burning brightly, so that in both good times and bad, in times of plenty and in leaner times, our faith can see us through, lighting the way forward for both us and others.

This is what the bridesmaids in today's parable discovered. Those who had made plans to replenish their oil lamps – their faith lives – were able to get through the night, ready for the dawning of a new day. But those who had not, were stuck in the darkness. ***Oil lamps and faith lives***. Lamps without oil don't work very well, do they? And lives without faith are the same – kind of empty, not enough spiritual fuel to carry things forward. We all feel that way sometimes, and that's when we need to have plenty of faith to tap into.

Where would we be without a little extra faith from time to time?!? In the dark, that's where. In Jesus' parable, when things are darkest, that's when the bridegroom comes and calls for light, that's when we need our faith the most.

¹ <http://www.alanrudnick.org/2015/02/27/why-churches-lost-millennials/>

It's midnight, and those who have neglected their oil lamps – their faith lives – they struggle to see a way forward. "Give us some of your oil," they say, "for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! There will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourself."

It's not that the wise don't want to help the foolish. It's just that we *all* sometimes find ourselves in the shadow of dwindling faith. Both the foolish and the wise "became drowsy and slept," says Jesus. Even the apostle became drowsy and slept the night when Jesus was arrested.

We do miss church sometimes, and neglect our other faith practices – Sunday school, sacrificial giving and service, prayer and Bible study. But to make a habit of neglecting our faith, well, you do that at your own peril.

For Jesus tells us to keep our faith at the ready. When "the bridegroom came... those who were ready says Jesus, went with him into the wedding banquet, and the door was shut." "Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'" How can we keep from hitting a brick wall when it comes to our faith, keep from running into a closed door? When we've got something in life we need to push through, what is it that will ensure we are able to move forward? Our faith practices, and particularly regular worship, which is the foundation of our Christian faith. Coming to church is how we are formed in the faith, a faith that gets deep down inside us, a faith that becomes who we are, no matter what.

Two old monks decided that, having lived together for years, they should try to have an argument like the rest of humankind. One asked the other how to do it, and he replied, "I will put something out on the floor and say, 'It's mine' and then you say, 'No, it's mine.' And then we'll argue about it" "All right," answered the first monk. The other did as was planned and said, 'It's mine.'" And with that, the first monk said, "All right. Have it."²

They couldn't even argue like the rest of us, because their Christian faith is so ingrained in who we are. Nobody is born this way. But everyone can be formed this way, by God. Through the grace of God, everyone who **keeps the faith alive** will always have enough spiritual light to see a way forward – even when we do have to rely on the faith of others to do so.

The time to replenish your faith life – your oil lamp – is now, both for your sake and for the sake of others. We all have people in our lives who just don't have it in them. At that moment, they desperately need to tap into someone else's faith.

You can be that someone for the people in your life! That's how it's supposed to work – that's why we have the church. Jesus established faith practices among his followers so that the world would become more and more like the kingdom of heaven. By keeping the faith through regular worship and all that pours out from that – sacrificial giving and mission outreach, Christian fellowship, and Bible

² Story told by Joan D. Chittister, OSB, *Living the Rule Today: A Series of Conferences on the Rule of Benedict* (Erie, Pa.: Benet Press, 1982).

study – by keeping the faith, we can be assured that the kingdom of heaven is not only our future in the fullness of Christ, but our present experience, in the community of faith.

So let us together, day by day like the earliest disciples, maintain and celebrate those faith practices, those faith practices that help us and others to live into the joy and security of God's kingdom, of God's way of life. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, we are humbled and awed by the company of saints to which we are joined, our fellow church members past and present who keep the faith alive day in and day out.

Thank you for your gracious call that invites all people to be an active part of your kingdom, your way of life.

Thank you for those in our lives who have shined a beacon of faith into our darkest moments.

Thank you for those who have helped us to build up our faith, modeling for us how to walk faithfully with you.

It is in the certainty of our faith that we pray for those in need, especially for those recovering from illness or surgery, struggling with loss, and those who are clinging to faith amid a particular need at this time in their lives.

We ask that your Spirit, O Lord, be poured out in abundance upon this gathering of the church that we may continue to shine the light of our faith into the lives of others.

We pray all this in the name of the light of our life, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**