

“STAYING CONNECTED”

Matthew 25:1-13

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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As the years of my ministry pile up, I have noticed a reality that is striking, really. For the most part, those who have been active, worshipping members of a church over an extended span of time and years usually cope better when tough times come than those who are not much involved in the life of a congregation.

A study recently published by the Public Library of Science confirmed that churchgoers are healthier, had higher levels of education, lower levels of poverty, and reduced rates of smoking and drinking than those who have little or no involvement with a church. Church members who are on the rolls but hardly ever in the pews do not fare much better than those for whom a connection with a church is non-existent. The key to a coherent and cohesive life seems to be a regimen of regular and engaged worship, engaged in the sense that simply sitting in worship like a bump on a log will not get it done. You have to pay attention, sing the hymns, pray the prayers, pass the peace, and, I might add, cheer the sermon in order to receive the full benefits.

I know that all sounds self-serving. It would be a surprise, right, to hear me say that participation in worship in a church like ours makes no discernible difference in a person's life compared to the lives of people who forego church altogether? It would be an even bigger upset if I were to tell you that those who do not engage in the worship life of the church are better off in life than those who do. But neither are the case.

My observation that those who worship regularly in a church like Market Square are equipped to deal better with the setbacks, hardships, and crises of life than those who do not often worship may seem self-interested, but it is almost always true. Our text today from Matthew affirms it but so does experience. Many times over the years, at the behest of a church member, I have been asked to talk with someone at a time of a crisis in that person's life who is not a member of a church or who has not had much involvement with a life of faith.

In some cases, I perhaps provided a modicum of help or comfort to those persons. But it is difficult to make up in the moment of tragedy, loss, or heartache for the repository of understanding and experience that accumulates over a long time of worship and nurture in the church. The gospel is much more of a guide to a way of life, an orientation, and “a long obedience in the same direction”¹ than a band-aid or a quick fix.

While there is always a ready market for flashy and on-the-spot religious experiences in our world, there is less enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of wisdom and virtue and little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness. Too many people expect to acquire in an instant what takes a lifetime to accrue, cultivate, and integrate. It reminds me of a cynical description I read recently of contemporary men and women who “want to climb Everest in a day or they lose interest.” It is never too late to begin an intentional commitment to life in a church community, but a scattershot approach does not suffice at any age if religion and spirituality are to be more than platitude or cliché and, instead, a very present help.²

What the church offers that undergirds the life of its attendant members is continual exposure to the holy scripture, to the wisdom of the Holy One, to an ethos of grace, mercy, and peace, and to a community of support that can lift us up when we are down or at least share our load. Over time, there comes a comprehension of what it means to walk by faith and not by sight.³ The increasing awareness of a kingdom that is upside down in relation to the ways of the world⁴ changes the ways we live and relate in it. There settles upon us a recognition that God’s thoughts transform our thoughts and God’s ways transcend our ways⁵ and that God is not limited by human constraints or conundrums. There arises in us a deepening trust that the first, last, and most important truth about God is that God is love⁶ and we are loved and no matter what happens to us in our lives, God’s love in Christ will not ever let us go.⁷

Our story today about ten bridesmaids, five of whom are accounted as wise and five who are called foolish depending on whether or not they had secured enough oil to keep their lamps burning well after the expected hour of the bridegroom’s return, is instructive. The bridegroom’s return was later than anticipated. The bridesmaids who had not taken care to bring with them

¹ Originally attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche but popularized in our day by Christian pastor and author Eugene H. Peterson in a book by that title.

² Psalm 46:1

³ 2 Corinthians 5:7

⁴ The Beatitudes of Jesus in Matthew 5:1-11 are an indication of such “upside-downness.”

⁵ Isaiah 55:8-9

⁶ 1 John 4:8

⁷ These are title lyrics to the hymn, “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go, text by George Matheson. Supporting scriptural witness is Romans 8:38-39.

sufficient oil to fuel their lamps through the long delay and had to go off in search of more oil missed the momentous event.

Some people use this parable to power a story about the second coming of Christ. “Be alert, be aware, be ready at any hour or time for you do not know when he will return.” I never liked the baggage that comes with that scenario because it sounds as if the Lord is a crotchety curmudgeon: *“You better watch out, you better not pout, you better not cry, I’m telling you why, Jesus Christ is coming to town. He’s making a list and checking it twice, He’s gonna find out who’s naughty or nice, Jesus Christ is coming to town. He sees you when you’re sleeping, he knows when you’re awake, He knows when you’ve been bad or good so be good for goodness sake.”* No.

The parable of the bridesmaids just as easily and perhaps more aptly can be a story about the importance of staying connected to Christ. It is about an ongoing relationship with him. It is not about saving our own skin at some future time but staying connected to Christ now for our sake and for the sake of the world. Take care not to allow the light or the fire to burn out in your relationship with the Lord, the parable tells us. Do not let the oil run out. Prepare, plan, make a commitment to wait on the Lord, to live expectantly in the Lord knowing that at any moment he may provide to you an insight, a direction, an answer, or an understanding that proves significant and important. Do not take your relationship with the Lord for granted.

We may expect in our lives the presence and Spirit of the Lord who has a lot to teach us. If we are not much interested in learning, the wisdom and instruction he offers will do us little good. Like those bridesmaids without enough oil and so missed the coming of the bridegroom, we will be unprepared when hard times come, difficult decisions, pivotal questions, a dire diagnosis, heartrending tragedy, or the fear of a world spiraling out of control.

The “oil” in the parable is whatever we need to do to stay connected with God. Show up. Be present in worship. Expect that something is going to happen when we gather. Be a part of a church community steeped in God’s command to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly. Pray. Avail yourselves of educational opportunities in the church because our Christian education does not stop for us when Sunday School does. *“When I was a child,”* St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, and it was appropriate. But when I became an adult, I put an end to childish things and learned adult things.”*⁸

⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:11

The “oil” in the parable is whatever we need to do to stay connected with God. Read and study the Bible. Sing in the choir because the heavenly music will be good for your soul. (And, if it isn’t, Tyler will be!) Pay attention to the hymns, pretty much the point of the last seven weeks of sermons. Who knows but that just at a time you need it, the Spirit will speak to you through one of the remembered lines of a song:

In a time of personal turmoil or turbulence, maybe you will hear the prayer in *I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art* reverberating in your life: “*Lord, give us peace and make us calm and sure, that in thy strength we evermore endure.*”

In a time when you need to rise above something that frightens you or to work through something that holds you back, when you need to move beyond your present mind to embrace a new perspective or to effect a different behavior in yourself, when you feel called to stand up and stand out rather than to take cover in a crowd, maybe the refrain in *God of Grace and God of Glory* will rise up in you: “*Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour.*”

In a time when you need encouragement, hope, or reassurance about the world, maybe the Lord will cause Henry Van Dyke’s lyric to come into your heart about a sovereign God: “*Mortals join the happy chorus which the morning stars began, Love divine is reigning o’er us joining all in heaven’s plan. Ever singing, march we onward, victors in the midst of strife. Joyful music leads us sunward in the triumph song of life.*”⁹

But if we have not prepared, if we have not been present in a community where those hymns are sung and God’s word is proclaimed and taught, where justice is espoused, there will be no “oil” available to us when we need light by which to see our way onward.

The “oil” in the parable is whatever we need to do to stay connected with God. Take weekly sabbath time, half a day a week at least if you can swing it, when you stop your routine for a while and do something that is not utilitarian. Take a walk in the woods and commingle with the handiwork of the Creator. Paint if that is your creative outlet or quilt or write a poem or whatever lifts you up. Spend some time with the Psalms. Do some spiritual reading or lose yourself in a novel whose story might call forth the beauty of your own story in the big picture of God’s story. Ask the church how you can be involved in a ministry among the poor where God resides. (Right now this church needs a team of people to make breakfast for our community neighbors on the third Sunday of each month.)

⁹ From the hymn “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,” text by the Reverend Henry Van Dyke

Only the bridesmaids in our parable who paid attention to their supply of oil shared in the joy of the bridegroom. The others to their own chagrin missed out. They could not at the last minute make up for their prior inattention. Just so, when we do not tend well to our connection with God we will be unprepared when setbacks or sorrows occur. We will not have developed sufficient trust in God or knowledge of God's ways for them to be of much help to us. Jesus, employing a different metaphor, taught his disciples this elemental lesson about life, saying, "*I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*"¹⁰

When I was in seminary, a course in the Hebrew language was my least favorite. Because of my disdain for it, I spent most of my study time on other subjects and too much time at Yankee Stadium and second-hand bookstores in New York City and did not keep up very well with my Hebrew assignments. When it came time for the final exam, it did not go very well. I thought I could cram during the last week or two before the test and it would all be okay. It wasn't. I learned that if I did not attend to Hebrew all along, when crunch time came I would suffer. I could not make up for my lack of previous engagement with Hebrew when I needed it. So does it go in our relationship with God.

Christ comes to us often and many times in our lives and I want us to be prepared to perceive and receive him always. "*Be ye steady and steadfast...*"¹¹ St. Paul says, always taking care to care for your relationship with God. In other words, do not let your oil run out!

Amen.

¹⁰ John 15:5

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 15:58