

November 12, 2017 (Stewardship Sunday)

TEXT: Matthew 25:1–13

TITLE: Lighting the Way

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

The parable we've just heard is about the Second Coming of Christ, but that's not what we're going to talk about today. The early Christian community knew about the years when Jesus Christ walked on earth and they anxiously awaited his return. They wanted to be ready for when things would be set right, when the wedding feast and heavenly banquet would begin and true justice will be the law of the land. So they told stories like this one—about bridesmaids waiting for a wedding party to appear at their door, ready to escort the bride and her attendants to the groom's house at last. We too are waiting. It's been 2000 years since Jesus walked on earth. As important as it is to wait and watch, maybe there is something just as important that demands our attention today—something we are supposed to be doing in the meantime. So we're not going to talk about the Second Coming. We're going to talk about something else. We're going to talk about lamps and oil and how the way we live and the way we give ideally lights a way straight to the Lord.

In the days before electricity, light was a critical commodity. Darkness was very real—in many ways, more real than it is today. When it was dark, you couldn't work; you couldn't write; you couldn't read. That's why in scripture a frequent symbol of faithfulness is that of a lamp—because by definition lamps push back darkness and allow you to work and do what needs to be done to care for yourself and for others, and thus to honor God. There isn't much ambiguity with a lamp—either it is lit or it's not. Neither is there much ambiguity when a lamp is seen as a symbol for faithfulness. Proverbs 13:9 says, *the light of the righteous rejoices, but the lamp of the wicked goes out.*

Now put yourself in Matthew's parable. Every one of us has a lamp. And every one of us has a flask to hold oil for that lamp. Officially you are waiting to escort the wedding party from the bride's house to the groom's house. If you have to do this escorting at night, you will need light to navigate the dark roads. If you will be traveling on dangerous paths, you need light for safety. If you are traveling as a group, you need light to guide the whole entourage. All of this is an excellent metaphor for a life of Christian faith and witness: You shine light in darkness—you offer hope and safety for anyone at risk—you work for the benefit of the whole group, the body of Christ, the wedding party entourage. Are you with me?

That is our calling. Just as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, *No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.* You are Christ's lamp in a dark world, offering light, safety and encouragement for all who walk beside you on the roads of life.

Now, a lamp without oil can't provide light. Just as a car without fuel won't run; just as a two-year-old who doesn't take a nap will crash and melt down. Just as working 60 hour weeks for longer than you care to remember means your health and your relationships

are going to suffer. We are lamps—but without oil, without spiritual reserves and faith resources, we sputter and go out.

There's a lamp and there's a flask to hold oil for the lamp. How do you get oil in that flask? In a literal sense, you go out in the world. You buy it from someone. In a literal-spiritual sense, you go out in the world; you look someone in the eyes, maybe ask about their family; you recognize how you are dependent on one another in this simple transaction; you love your neighbor as yourself and let your neighbor love you as herself, and then you take your flask of oil home. Being lamp owners means we plan ahead, engage with others, and act as faithfully as we can and thereby keep our flasks filled. Why? Because the flask of oil is just as important as the lamp if you want to shine light in the darkness on the way to the Bridegroom's banquet.

Now this sermon might be in danger of sounding like something found in the Boy Scout manual—that the key to Christian living is simply to “be prepared.” Preparation is important, for we don't know when Christ is returning, when the culmination of history will happen, or even what exactly tomorrow holds for us. But more than preparation is needed. Intentionality is needed. Morality, integrity and justice are needed. And grace is needed—if we want to keep our flasks filled while we wait in these troubled times.

Question: Ten years ago, what were the five largest companies in the world? Answer: Exxon Mobil, General Electric, Microsoft, Citigroup and Bank of America. Two utilities; two financial institutions, one tech company. What are the five largest companies today? Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook—all tech companies and monopolies in their specific areas.¹ There is no denying that these companies have touched every corner of our lives over the past decade—the Smartphones in our hands, Google maps guiding us to our driving destinations, Amazon Prime delivering packages right to our doorsteps. I don't see us stepping away from these advances, but I don't want us to be indifferent about the true price we pay for these services.

Everything that pulls us away from interacting with one another means that our flasks are not full of oil, for oil best comes through social currency and human connections. We make choices about whether to buy from a farmer's market or a chain grocery store or have meals sent to us by Blue Apron. We make choices about buying a book or coffee from a local independent shop or a large chain or an internet supplier. The first two options represent institutions that employ people—people who need paychecks and pay taxes and join our churches and sit through school PTA meetings. The first two allow us to make eye contact, to exchange small talk, to make a connection that literally shines a light on our shared humanity. And if things ever get rough—if things fall apart socially, and we don't know our neighbors—we don't know the shop owners—we don't know the teacher or doctor or electrician—how great will the darkness be in those days!

Yale professor Timothy Snyder recently wrote a short, timely book called “On Tyranny.” It contains 20 points on how to resist tyranny—to learn from the lessons of the failed 20th century social experiments of fascism, Nazism, and communism. Part of his advice is to remind us that tyranny is resisted when we keep our flasks filled through nurturing

spirits of social capital and faithful generosity. One of his points simply reminds us to make eye contact and exchange small talk. The greatest tool of tyrants is for us to fear the other and fall silent precisely when we should speak up. Tyrannical power wants our bodies softening in our chairs and our emotions focused only on screens. Instead, Snyder tells us to get outside. Put our bodies in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar people. In terms of our biblical analogy that means going out there and filling your flasks through seeing clearly who else will need the light you might offer—who else is walking beside you on the road to the bridegroom’s house—who else is connected to you as you depend on the entire community to live safely, live democratically, live justly as children of one God. We are to plan and act now for the light we will need when darkness falls.

Flasks must be filled in advance, so our light won’t go out when it is most needed. Stewardship is a flask-filling discipline and it takes many forms. There is the stewardship of gifts given to those in need, donations to charities, social programs, libraries, veterans’ groups, cultural programs and United Way and women’s shelters, and yes, stewardship given to churches like ours. All these expressions of stewardship are how we fill our flasks. As stewards we stop the unrelenting busyness of life for a moment and think ahead. We silence the omnipresent voice of commerce long enough to consider what has real value and must be protected. We lift our gaze off ourselves and, remembering the example of Christ, we ask what we might pledge and do now for the sake of what is to come—knowing that this act of filling our flasks, making our financial commitment, shapes what we do tomorrow. You don’t pledge to anything out of indifference, walking away from it with a shrug after you’ve committed your resources. No, it is now a part of you. It is the flask you carry—the priority you value. In the words of Christ, it is how we stay awake.

In a moment we will bring forward bags of donated food and our pledge card commitments for the coming year. Now, for what I’m about to say, I haven’t checked with the chair of our church’s Finance Committee—but in my opinion, if filling out a pledge card is not part of filling your flask—is not part of intentionally nurturing your spiritual priorities and desire to shine the light of Christ against the darkness around us—then we don’t want your pledge card. There’s a lot of good that comes from pledges, like oil for church lamps. But if the gift isn’t given for the sake of light, for present faithfulness and future preparedness, then it’s not something we want in our flasks. Nor should it be in your flasks either. That’s part of the difference between spiritual wisdom and foolishness.

Here’s what we profess and believe. In the end, there is a coming together, a banquet of Christ intended for this life and the life to come. There are lamps and flasks, faith and works, private prayer and common worship, piety and advocacy—all of these are important. So be awake—be thoughtful—be precisely who God means for you to be and, by grace, longs for you to be. May your flask be full and your light ever shine brightly and joyfully, for the Lord is near!

AMEN

¹ Jonathan Taplin, “Is it Time to Break Up Google?”—*New York Times*, April 22, 2017.