

A SPIRITUAL ENERGY CRISIS

Matthew 5.1-13

November 12, 2017

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Matthew 25.1-13

25“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But 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 yourselves.’ ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Anthem: “Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning,” spiritual arr. by Andre Thomas.

Do you remember November 2008?

We had just elected the first African-American president of the United States. People who had all but given up on America were dancing in the streets.

In November 2008, it looked the government was ready to roll out a financial plan that would finally pull us out of the “Great Recession.”

On this Sunday in November 2008, I was preaching on this very text in the process of becoming the pastor of Seattle First Baptist Church.

New possibilities seemed to be lighting up everywhere and all that light may have made the wisdom of tending that inner light pretty easy.

But a week after preaching that sermon, my dad was dead. The cancer that was eating away at his body finally took him.

In that same time, Walt Pulliam who had been a mentor to me, also died.

In the months that followed, we discovered that electing the first African-American president did not do away with white supremacy and, in fact, gave rise to even more subtle forms of racism.

The financial plan that turned around the economy essentially benefitted the most wealthy among us and continues to concentrate more and more resources into the hands of very few.

In those years since November 2008, what I call the three “D’s” of congregational challenge have taken their toll:

Deaths – the loss we sustain in losing our beloved ones;

Defections – the people who go away disappointed and sometimes angry because we couldn’t be what they wanted or needed (and all the second-guessing and self-blame that goes with it);

and Departures – the people who go away, not because they are unhappy but because their lives simply take them somewhere else and we have to do the difficult and painful work of saying goodbye.

All of those are hard and they all take their toll on us in different ways.

In those years since November 2008, for lots of reasons, perhaps the wisdom of tending that inner light has been dulled a bit or seems like more of a challenge.

So I find myself being drawn this morning to another version of this text in Matthew we learned in Sunday School:

*Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burnin’
Give me oil in my lamp, I pray,
Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burnin’
Keep me burnin’ till the break of day.*

Of course there were other versions: “Give me gas in my Ford, keep me running for the Lord.” Or the California version: “Give me wax for my board, keep me surfen’ for the Lord.”

If you had to spend any time on a church bus with teenagers, the possibilities for this song were endless.

But from where I am standing, in this November 2017, I find myself taking that old Sunday School song seriously.

“Give me oil in my lamp,” because I’m pretty close to running out.
“Keep be burnin’” because, frankly, that inner light is sputtering.

The difficult wisdom of this parable in Matthew 25 for me is the realization that, regardless of what I hope or what I tell myself or what other people expect of me, my spiritual energy is limited.

It’s easy to talk about the infinite spirit of compassion but there is such a thing as “compassion fatigue.” We know how powerful it can be to just be present with someone but sometimes we just need to get away. We have seen the capacity of spiritual energy to change lives and change the world but we also know that burn out is real and can be devastating.

The spiritual energy at the core of the universe may be unlimited. But our energy is not.

And rather than blaming ourselves – or others – or feeling guilty for not being “spiritual enough,” maybe we just need to sing with a little more conviction: “Give my oil in my lamp, I pray.”

I always like to point out the obvious. If you are teaching a lesson about sharing, this probably isn't the story you want to tell. Five of these wedding attendants are unprepared and when they ask their friends to share their oil, the wise ones say "no."

This is not a story about sharing. That's the next story in Matthew about investing your talents wisely or the one immediately following that which is the famous "when did we see you hungry or naked or in prison?" and Jesus says, "Inasmuch as you did it for one of the least of these, you did it to me."

Before all that, is this story about keeping your lamps trimmed and burning.

And maybe the wisdom of the story is that no matter how wise other people are, no one can do that tending for you.

The other side of that freedom we Baptists call "soul liberty" is the responsibility you have to keep tending your own inner light.

The best any of the rest of us can do is to help you discover what it takes for you to do that. We can't do it for you. We can only encourage you and walk with you and believe in you when you aren't able any longer to believe in yourself.

That inner light is yours and it is for you to tend it. And when you need help, to ask for it. "Give me oil in my lamp, I pray!"

I'll confess that I, for one, need help this morning. The challenges of life and the disappointment and anger and fear I feel with present state of the world has taken its toll. Wisdom tells me that it is my responsibility to tend that inner light but some of the old ways of doing that don't seem to work anymore. And sometimes less healthy ways show up to try to take their place. I know it would be foolish to trust them.

The wise thing is stop and to pay attention and to listen for a wisdom greater than my own. Maybe there is an alternative spiritual energy source I haven't discovered yet. Maybe there is an exercise or way of being that will fire up my soul again.

I don't know. I just know that, on this November Sunday in 2017, I need oil in my lamp.

One of the things I am coming to realize is that I have been living a reactive spirituality; that is, things happen in the world and in my life and I react to them out of what I think my spirituality is – or should be. So that spiritual energy is always being drained by the next thing that demands something from it. And these days, it's hard to keep up.

I am trying to imagine a proactive spirituality that isn't being constantly drained by the next hard thing that happens but has this pre-emptive quality about it no matter what happens. I think it may have something to do with what Buddhists call "detachment" and what Sister Joan Chittister means by "holy indifference," being centered in an "awareness of the multiple gifts of God and openness to all of them" -- being detached "from the idea that there is only one way for me to go through life joyfully." Holy indifference ...

teaches me, she says, that there is no room for isolation, abandonment, death of the spirit when I lose one thing because I know that there is something else waiting for me in its place. If only I can allow myself to watch for it, to wait for it, to grasp it when it comes.

The moral of the story in Mathew is "be awake because you never know the hour something or someone will show up." That's different than the so-called wisdom of "waiting for the other shoe to drop." I've got that one down. And it leads to being negative and defensive and reactive and isolated. That's not working and it's a waste of spiritual energy. I want to cultivate the spirituality of holy indifference that is being awake to the gifts in every moment and being open to them all.

In the story in Matthew, being awake isn't the outcome of keeping my lamp trimmed and burning. It's the way that inner light stays lit.

And here's one of the reasons I need to be awake: there is something at stake, not just for me, but for the world.

Maybe because it's the day after Veterans Day and a few weeks before Chanukah, but I've been thinking about that Peter Yarrow song:

*Light one candle for the Maccabee children
With thanks that their light didn't die
Light one candle for the pain they endured
When their right to exist was denied
Light one candle for the terrible sacrifice
Justice and freedom demand
But light one candle for the wisdom to know
When the peacemaker's time is at hand
Don't let the light go out!
It's lasted for so many years!
Don't let the light go out!
Let it shine through our hope and our tears.
Light one candle for the strength that we need
To never become our own foe
And light one candle for those who are suffering
Pain we learned long ago
Light one candle for all we believe in
That anger not tear us apart
And light one candle to find us together
With peace as the song in our hearts*

Beloved ones, tending that inner light isn't just about our own spiritual well-being. There is something at stake. It matters for the sake of each other and the world. So don't let the light go out! Whatever it takes to keep that lamp trimmed and burning, do it because we can't let the light go out. It's the only way we will see our way home.

So today, just now, when you are asked to sing “This Little Light of Mine,” when you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts ... just do it.

NOTES

Joan D. Chittister, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), p.35.
“Light One Candle” by Peter Yarrow was written and performed in the 1980s as part of Israel’s Peace Now movement following the war in Lebanon. It is not without its own controversy.