

Matthew 25:1-13

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans

November 8, 2020

Building Resilience

During one of my early years living in Philly, I had the deep joy and blessing of living with two other pastors, around the same age as me and serving in similar contexts to mine. And we spent that year building intentional community in a way that will always stay with me. We would cook and eat together, laugh together, debate together, and pray together.

One of the most meaningful Lent seasons I've ever had was with these two women. We spent time practicing gratitude, lectio divina, and just created together some really beautiful worshipful experiences. Just for us, which as pastors could feel like a drain to be creating more worship, but it was just for us, so it energized us and connected us the grace-filled way worship and liturgy is intended.

One of my fondest memories of that time is that we would gather around our big dining room table and before any meal or any prayer or any gathering, formal or informal, we would light this beautiful, handmade oil lamp that my dear friend had brought back from Israel but for whatever reason had never actually used, until it felt like the exact thing we needed to complete our altar.

Having never used an oil lamp before, the first few times we used this lamp, we had a rather long wick, which made for a pretty intense flame and also used up the oil we had ridiculously quickly. And it brought to our very Presbyterian minds this Scripture and of course the anthem that the choir sung for us: keep your lamps trimmed and burning.

We learned that if we did not trim our wick, we would burn brightly, almost obnoxiously so, and we would burn through that oil much faster than we'd like.

We learned to keep our lamps trimmed and burning, so that we could continue to gather around that lamp to connect with the Divine and to experience the grace, growth, and beauty that comes with living in community.

This day, no matter how you're feeling, no matter what has happened, no matter who are, what we are all needing is to connect with the Divine and to experience the grace, growth, and beauty that comes with being in community ... and I believe that in order to do that, we have got to keep our lamps trimmed and burning.

You might be saying, “Pastor, what does that even mean?” And to you I would say, great question. What does it even mean? This is a really bizarre text for many reasons, but I would say it’s primarily hard to unpack because this is a metaphor that is completely lost on the modern mind.

So, to just quickly unpack this, I am going to quote one biblical scholar, Lindsay Armstrong, who I think just breaks it down perfectly. She says this:

Near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). At the end of the same sermon, Jesus reminds, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

She goes on to say:

Similarly, the oil in this parable can be understood as faith, good works, practices, or spiritual reserves that remain constant and shine during good times as well as times of waiting for God.¹

The bridesmaids are waiting for the bride and groom, to welcome them to the glorious feast. Some were wise, and came prepared to shine throughout the long, tiresome night. And others, well they learned a very important lesson about coming prepared.

As we find ourselves in the midst of a very long night (and just to be clear, I’m talking about these past few days, weeks, or even years). What we are experiencing this day: the rising threat of violence, the growing divide of wealth, the chaos and confusion and broken relationships, this is 400 years in the making.

We are living in the cold and terrible night of White Supremacy, and no matter what happens this coming week or this coming year, or presidential term, the death dealing blows of White Supremacy are not going to go away.

Let me be very clear: regardless of who wins this presidential election, this cold and terrible night is long from over. And I don’t want to make y’all despair. I don’t want to bring ya down. But I do want you to be informed, my dear, dear friends, because I want you to be keep shining. I want you to keep resisting. To keep questioning and

¹ Lindsay P. Armstrong, “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word: Year A*.

learning. To keep mourning with those who mourn and to keep standing up for what is good and right and just.

This night is long and I don't want y'all to run out of oil.

One of the things I've been thinking a lot about lately is eschatology. Which is a fancy word for End Times. Some of you have probably heard me say recently, "Okay, Jesus, now would be a great time come on back!"

And I'll be very honest with y'all, if y'all will not hold this evangelical confession I'm about to make against me ... I've spent a lot of my Christian life yearning for the return of Christ. Not in a way that pushes me to become radical in my reading of the Book of Revelation like those who are trying decipher and hurry up the timeline. I find this ridiculous and super unfaithful.

And also I still yearn for a Christ in the clouds descending upon earth to bring about the reign of God and the kingdom of heaven on earth kind of Second Coming.

And I know that my desire comes from my weariness of the world as it is. And also, if I'm being completely honest, from my wavering – if present at all – faith in humanity's ability to be anything other than self-serving and violent.

I don't know where y'all find yourselves on this spectrum, and I would just say that I confess this to you not because I am trying to convince you of anything at all or disparage any belief that you hold dear and need to be true.

I offer this because as I sit with this Scripture about the elusive time when the Christ is to come again, and as I consider where we are as a nation and as a world, I'm experiencing this shift in my eschatology, and I am wondering if maybe it has much less to do with what happens in the end, and the whole point of this call to discipleship is just how we move in the meantime.

I've been reading a book called *Hope in the Dark* by Rebecca Solnit². And along with a number of activists and changemakers, she suggests that rather than yearning for the utopian vision where all live in perfect harmony and there is no more work to do, we should instead seek to live in the moments of creation. When communities and peoples come together to make space for one another, to make space for diverse ideas, to make space for all to create something together.

² Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, Nation Books (2004), Haymarket Books (2016).

When our focus is on the end goal, what we want it to look like, we are much more susceptible to living in ways that are harmful and unfaithful all because we believe that the means justify the end. But if the end is unknowable, uncertain, perhaps even nonexistent, then the means are actually the only thing that matters.

Solnit quotes a friend of hers, an activist from London named John Jordan, who says this: “When we are asked how are going to build a new world, our answer is, “We don’t know, but let’s build it together.”³

Solnit concludes that “the goal is not so much to go on and create the world ... as it is to live in that time of creation ...” This helps us resist enacting our own “idea of perfection but opens up the freedom of each [person] to participate in inventing the world.”⁴

How we move, how we show up, how we make space, and how we enter into the act of creation ... this is what matters.

Considering how we participate while we wait throughout the cold and lonely night, how we come prepared, ensuring that our lamps burns brightly and consistently.

There is no arriving. There is no end to the work. Made in the image of God, we are invited into the ongoing work of creation. And I know that might feel overwhelming, especially if you’re already feeling tired. But let me just say that this approach to revolution, to faithfulness and discipleship is so full of grace and hope. Because we not consumed with longing for the distant shore of paradise, instead we are energized by the movement and the love and the care and the excitement of creating together in community.

OH, and one last, super important word. Like if you did not hear anything else in this sermon, I want you to hear this: of the 10 bridesmaids, 5 were wise and 5 were foolish. But note that every single one of them fell asleep.

Which suggests to me that when we are feeling weary and rundown while we wait throughout this long, cold night, you better believe that it is okay to take a nap!

If you need to rest and recharge, do so, because there will be more work to do when you awake. And when we are rested and well fed and nurtured, that work becomes a gift and a space to experience joy, rather than an obligation or a burden.

³ Solnit, 93.

⁴ Solnit, 95.

I want to close with a poem by Audette Fulbright Fulson, a Unitarian Universalist Minister. This poem is titled Prayer for The Morning, and I offer it to y'all as a prayer, a hope, and a gift to sustain us in the work that is before us.

So, here it is: A Prayer for the Morning

*Did you rise this morning,
broken and hung over
with weariness and pain
and rage tattered from waving too long in a brutal wind?
Get up, child.
Pull your bones upright
gather your skin and muscle into a patch of sun.
Draw breath deep into your lungs;
you will need it
for another day calls to you.
I know you ache.
I know you wish the work were done
and you
with everyone you have ever loved
were on a distant shore
safe, and unafraid.
But remember this,
tired as you are:
you are not alone.
Here
and here
and here also
there are others weeping
and rising
and gathering their courage.
You belong to them
and they to you
and together,
we will break through
and bend the arc of justice
all the way down
into our lives.*

Let it be so for us this day, and every day. In the name of the Triune God, who Creates, Sustains, and Redeems us all. Amen.