

I come to you in the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We are in the season of stewardship. Following this sermon, you will hear from a fellow parishioner and member what that means to them, you will see the current leadership of this Cathedral offering their pledges today as we prepare for a big ingathering next week. Our stewardship campaign is centered around the concept of being bearers of the light, of keeping and spreading the light of Christ out into the world through the work that we do in this place, through the community that we have developed in this place, through the hopes that we have to draw others in with our light.

But today, I want us to consider a different take on being bearers of the light. I want us to read our gospel lesson today with our stewardship theme ringing in our ears, as we hear the parable of the bridesmaids, five who rush out, with excitement, with reckless abandon, and five who rush out, with excitement, with reckless abandon, and with a spare flask of oil. It is this latter group, those who bring extra fuel, just in case, who are rewarded. These five are able to bear light, to find the bridegroom, greet him, and be whisked into the wedding banquet. The other five are left out, for they could not hold the light out. They went all in, but with no plan, no backup just in case, they could not bear the light, for their lights extinguished before they ever had the chance to bear it when it counted.

If we think about being bearers of light as a physical reality, as a tangible practice of being prepared and ready, it puts the call of being bearers of light, that light of Christ for the whole world, into a new understanding, for if we must literally hold that light of Christ out, to see and be seen, it leaves us to question, how are we accomplishing this task?

It is the end of this parable that leaves us with an answer and a challenge: keep awake. In a very literal sense, we must keep awake in order to do the work of the church. We have to be awake to what is happening in our world, in our city, in our neighborhoods, in this church community. We must educate ourselves. We must know the work that is before us, and how we are to approach this work as a congregation of faithful people. And with this, we have to make sure that we have the fuel we need to keep the lamps lit.

Church becomes for us a place to be fueled. We come to the altar table together to be fueled. We ask for forgiveness, seeking repentance, because sin drains that fuel. We are fueled through the experience of being in holy community with one another. We are fueled through our openness to learn from one another, to grow in our faith, to experience our faith in real, tangible ways. We are fueled with literal food and drink, shared at a table where all are welcome, where no barrier exists, where we all come to meet Christ, and in this shared meal we leave filled and ready to spread the light of Christ out into the world.

But, if we simply stop with Sunday morning, if we do not live into our faith, if we do not practice prayer, if we do not serve Christ in all people, if we fail to continue to grow in our faith and knowledge of the love of Christ, then we fail to have that extra flask of oil for when our fuel runs out as we await for Sunday to come around again. We have to maintain vigilance in our faith. We cannot be bearers of light, if we run out of fuel halfway through the week. And, it is not always (or even often) those who do the most that run out of fuel (at least right away). For those who do the most are often those who know that they need the reserve fuel to draw from when their initial supply runs low. Often, it is those who do the least, who become complacent in their faith, who assume that showing up on Sunday from

time to time only is enough, that constantly run out of fuel. They wonder why they feel a draw back to church, when it's been a minute. They wonder why they feel drained. And the answer is simple, without that reserve fuel, what you receive at worship on Sunday is not enough in and of itself to take you through the whole week, if you are going to be doing the work of a believer and bearing the light of Christ to the world.

A lot has been written about the decline of the so-called “mainline protestant denominations” (namely: Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, American Baptist, UCC and Disciples of Christ), but it was not put into such dire terms until an article last spring with the headline: *If it doesn't stem its decline, mainline Protestantism has just 23 Easters left*. Now, it must be said that even the author of the piece admits that the title is a bit hyperbolic, but it still is technically true: if the current rate of decline continues, mainline Protestantism will see all members of its churches gone by 2039. So, even when our endowment outlives all of us, there won't be anyone in the pews to benefit from the giving that has preceded us, and the giving that is still to come.

However, this is all predicated on what I hope is a pretty big if: if the current rates continue. They don't have to continue. We don't have to see people stop coming to church. We don't have to see people leaving this church to find faith in places that don't exactly match up with their beliefs, but they have robust children and youth programs, they have a nursery that is clean, well-maintained, easily accessible and visible. They have small groups where faith can be nurtured and grown. They have people who reach out when I haven't been in a couple weeks, and sure, I don't think some of their more conservative views are quite for me, and the music is not exactly my taste, at least they care about me, care about

my family, care about making sure that we have enough fuel to make it through a week and more. We can do these things. We can be this type of home, and enable people to worship here without reservations. We are the Episcopal Church, we live into the via media, the middle way, we hold our community together in our differences, rather than in our conformity. And it is in this balance of the via media that we need to awake. We need to awake to the reality that people want to be pushed and challenged in a place that welcomes them for who they are, respects who they are, and while doing so, also provides the resources for them to see all of their needs, their family's needs met.

So, we must ask the questions:

What is the message that we share from this place?

Why would people want to join this community?

What can I do to let people know this?

We must light our lamps. We must take extra flasks of oil. We must light our way together as we await the bridegroom, for we know neither the hour nor the day. We have to insure that when we leave this place to bear the light, we have the fuel we need to do so. We must ask, are my needs being met in the place? Are my family's needs being met? Would the needs of my friend, my neighbor be met if I invited them into our community? If the answer is yes, ask how can I continue to support this, how do I insure that this source of fuel does not run out. If the answer is no to one or all of those questions, ask how can I change that reality, how do I insure that this needed source of fuel is realized, actualized, and made available in this place.

We are all here in this place worshipping together, because we have found something in this place that speaks to us, that fills us, that leaves us confident that we can take our lamps out, with enough fuel to greet the bridegroom, even if his arrival is delayed. What we must ask ourselves now is, have we been lulled into a place of comfort, do we doze off, assuming we have enough oil to make it through the night, or are we awake, are we vigilant, do we have that reserve of oil to draw from when our light needs to shine a little bit longer, a little bit brighter. We are called to bearers of the light, but we can't shine light into the darkness if we run out fuel to feed the wick.

The work we are called to do as followers of Christ, to be bearers of the light, requires fuel. Hopefully you find that fuel here in this place. Hopefully you find that fuel in the ministries and activities that we share in as a community of faith. If you don't, help us see where we are coming up short, for we all want to insure that when the bridegroom comes that all have enough fuel to greet him. You are bearers of light, you take your lamp with you out into this world, to shine in the darkness, to bring Christ into the world, and to prepare the world for Christ's return. Prepare yourself as well, keep awake, be prepared, and when the bridegroom comes at the unexpected hour and day, you will be ready to greet him with your light.

Amen.