

November 9, 2014—Stewardship Sunday

Sermon: Tending the Light

Text: Matthew 25:1-13 J.B. Phillips New Testament

25¹⁻¹³ "In those days the kingdom of Heaven will be like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were sensible and five were foolish. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. But the sensible ones brought their lamps and oil in their flasks as well. Then, as the bridegroom was a very long time, they all grew drowsy and fell asleep. But in the middle of the night there came a shout, 'Wake up, here comes the bridegroom! Out you go to meet him!'" Then up got the bridesmaids and attended to their lamps. The foolish ones said to the sensible ones, 'Please give us some of your oil—our lamps are going out!' 'Oh no,' returned the sensible ones, 'there might not be enough for all of us. Better go to the oil-shop and buy some for yourselves.' But while they had gone off to buy the oil the bridegroom arrived, and those bridesmaids who were ready went in with him for the festivities and the door was shut behind them. Later on the rest of the bridesmaids came and said, 'Oh, please, sir, open the door for us!' But he replied, 'I tell you I don't know you!' So be on the alert—for you do not know the day or the time.

What is your great, good place to be? Maybe you know the thoughts of **Ray Oldenburg** an American urban sociologist known for writing about the importance of informal public gathering places for a functioning civil society, democracy, and civic engagement. He coined the term "third place" and is the author of the books *Celebrating The Third Place* and *The Great Good Place*.

Oldenburg suggests that beer gardens, main streets, pubs, cafes, coffeehouses, post offices, and other "third places" are the heart of a community's social vitality and the foundation of a functioning democracy. Do you have a favorite place to go where you see others outside of work or home?

Oldenburg said these places promote social equality by leveling the status of guests, provide a setting for grassroots politics, create habits of public association, and offer psychological support to individuals and communities.

Yes, in our modern suburban societies time is primarily spent at home, and, maybe, at work. The third places, usually, offer a neutral public space for a community to connect and establish bonds. Third places "host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work."

So, what is your third "good" place to be? We hope, of course, you'll say the church. Some people say that without thinking because they know the church is the "great, good place to be." The church nurtures life in a way that no other social institution can. For some people, this has not always been the case and one has to pause and think about it or even work toward it.

My hope is that we feel our church is that third good place we want to be and we do whatever we must do to make it, not only a place we where want to be, but a place where others want to be as well. Why?

We believe the church is a light in the world, a community that shows what God offers, what God asks, and how God wants us to be known and perceived in new images and expressions. God wants us to live and perceive life's mysteries or life's difficult passages with as little pain as possible but certainly with some challenge. We believe the church is a place where this can happen. The church may speak and act, as human and fallible as it is, with intention that all creation move toward God's goodness, God's compassion, God's light.

We come committed to be the "good place we want to be!" With our pledge cards you have said that you want the church to be that place where we can safely and boldly ask life and death questions, we can confront evil, we can pray for healing, walk the

second mile, love our neighbor as we love ourselves and practice forgiveness. We have said this with our time, our money, and our gifts. We know the value of tending the light.

We want the church to be a place where we can prepare for whatever comes in life. We all, in some way, prepare for good beginnings and good endings, for sharing joy and sorrow. Even though we may not be actively grieving or in crisis, we know people who are and at some point we will be there too.

The days after September 11, 2001, I was glad the church was there for people who flooded the sanctuary where I was pastor to grieve together and find comfort in the dark hours of tragedy and loss. I am glad the church is there for people who are prepared and who are not prepared for finding God's strength and comfort at times when the future seems bleak and full of doubt. Who is doing the preparation? Are you?

Is the church what we hope it will be as a third good place to be???

Our scripture this morning tells that about the importance of our faith community, our church, and the place it holds in our lives. The church can be an important place for you but you must give it some thought and decide to invest.

At our baptism we are identified with the Christian community and gathered into a place to belong as the body of Christ. We become stewards of the gifts that God has given us; it is not an individual journey but one we make together. It is a marriage of the human and the divine, the ordinary and sacred. Has this happened in an intentional way for you? Is it a serious matter, a covenant you want to honor in the fullest way?

The illustration in scripture for what it is like to be joined with God in a serious relationship comes from the metaphor of a wedding feast. Many writers in the biblical period compare the coming of God's reign, God's relationship to our human family, to a wedding feast. They believed that the sin, sorrow, brokenness,

violence and death of this present time was temporary. God's coming institutes the divine rule in every time and place. With God's rule there would forgiveness, rejoicing, peace, life without fear and without end. The covenant to belong God had the benefits of this peace which surpassed human understanding so we have a story of a wedding.

The story begins with the bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom to come. They are in a situation like Matthew's early church community, waiting for the coming of Christ. They wanted what they had with him when he was living and so they waited for the spirit to descend and embrace them. What will they do in their "waiting time?" How will they be preparing?

Recently, I talked with colleague about coming to church and coming every Sunday one could come. She was saying to me that sometimes it is hard. One particular Sunday, she wondered why she was in church. The hymns were dirges, sad and not her favorites. The sermon and prayers just didn't speak to her.

She got to the end of the service and there they were ---words in the last hymn that spoke to her, flooded our soul with messages of love, embrace, hope, forgiveness. It was exactly what she needed that day. She had an experience with God's presence that she didn't expect. She knew her faithfulness prepared her for that little epiphany.

We laughed as we talked about those times when we didn't want to come to church or make the effort to engage in some spiritual exercise, but when we did, we always had a benefit. It was if God was saying, your preparation will always be rewarded. Your intentions to be near me will always have a positive response.

So, back to parable and its story of what we do when we prepare for God's coming. In the parable, finally, the bridegroom arrives and the bridesmaids go out to meet him. Five are ready to join the wedding feast—they have plenty of oil for their lamps. But the others are not ready. They have no oil for the lamps. They have

prepared for what it is to come. Frantically they must leave to buy more oil.

The story is teach those who are waiting for God's rule, God's coming, to always be alert and ready; in other words, we are to tend the light. That light may be the little flame of hope within us that we know is there but is weak. That light may be the tiny yearning for God to give us something to know that we are held and loved by a divine presence.

When we make the church our home away from home, do we prepare in some way for that to happen? I say yes.

What a gift, this Stewardship Sunday to know we are waiting, hoping and rejoicing together in God's presence. With all we know to do, our preparation is active not passive and with this attitude, we truly know God's blessing!

Stewardship Sunday is a time to ask ourselves if we are doing our part in our church to tend the light, to be faithful, to take our responsibility seriously in this covenant to share God's love with one another. I thank you for your faithful stewardship, giving of your gifts to the life of church, so that we may organize our lives around one another and fulfill the dream, the hope of Christ for his followers.

Jesus invited those he traveled with to "Go, be my disciples!" He assured them that they were not alone. He said, "I will be with you." And, we say, "Here, we are Lord, send us and bless us."

We are the church, this great good place to be, and we have chosen to live together and light our lights shine in this place. May we be called anew to "tend the light" and be ready, be alert, whatever our long nights of waiting. May God give us courage and strength.

I learned a wonderful song in church when I was growing up. Maybe you know it and will sing it with me to close out our message.

*Give me oil for my lamp, keep it burning
Give me oil for my lamp I pray
Give me oil for my lamp, keep it burning
Keep it burning till the light of day*

Chorus:

*Sing Hosannah, sing Hosannah
Sing Hosannah to the King of Kings
Sing Hosannah, sing Hosannah
Sing Hosannah to the King
Amen!*