

***Lamp-Ready Lives***  
***Matthew 25:1-13***  
***November 6, 2011***

Several nights ago after our Church Council meeting I was summoned to John Muir Hospital as the on-call chaplain. I went to the pediatric unit to visit with a 19 year old diagnosed with pneumonia. The nurse told me he was frightened; they were going to biopsy his lung the next day. They were still awaiting results of a tuberculosis test so he was in an isolation room. I suited up in gown and mask and went in to meet this young man. I listened to his life story and he asked about mine. When the time felt right I asked if he would like to hear a Bible passage. He eagerly consented and closed his eyes to listen to the words of Isaiah: “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:28-31).

He said, “I need that. Read me some more.” We continued reading Bible passages for nearly an hour until he seemed more relaxed and ready to sleep and rest. He was like a sponge soaking up the words of hope, letting them sink deep into his frightened, lonely soul. Before I left he asked if I would return the next day before the test. He went through a series of procedures the following day which determined that in addition to pneumonia he had suffered a mild stroke.

This young man had lived in a foster home, but has been living on his own since he was 16. He spoke of friends and brothers who live at a distance, and his foster family who wants him to return to them. His faith had been nurtured in his early years by his grandparents and later by his foster family, who are faithful Christians. But in focusing all his energies on the struggle to survive, his own faith had been neglected. His lamp had gone dry; he longed for it to be replenished. I saw him several times and each time he asked me to read more passages from the Bible. I gave him a copy of *The Message* marked with several verses which we had read and other passages to which he might turn on his own. By the time this young man left the hospital I hope that he found his spirit replenished, his empty lamp filled with some healing ointment until he finds the next filling station on his journey.

Jesus’ parable of the ten maidens with their oil lamps prompts us to be prepared for the unexpected. His message is set in the context of a wedding. In Jesus’ day wedding guests assembled at the home of the bride and were entertained by her parents while waiting for the groom. When the bridegroom approached, the

guests, including the bridesmaids, lighted torches and went out to greet him. In a festive procession, the entire party walked to the groom's home where his parents were waiting for the ceremony and the extended banquet that would follow and continue for several days.

In this parable, for whatever reason, the groom does not show up on time; the hours pass, and many of the waiting wedding party fall asleep. Finally at midnight, they are awakened with a shout, "He's coming!" The bridesmaids leap into action, trim their lamps, and head out to meet him. Five of the ten have used up their oil and have no reserves. Their attempt to borrow some from their wiser, more prudent sisters is rejected. Frantically, they set out in search of oil, not easily found at midnight, and in the process miss the wedding procession. When they finally arrive at the groom's home, the door is locked. "Keep awake," Jesus concludes, "You do not know when God will come to you." Staying alert, waiting purposefully, being prepared is the message.<sup>1</sup>

This is an equal opportunity parable. All the bridesmaids have the opportunity to participate in the wedding procession. Some are prepared for the unexpected delay of the bridegroom; others are not. Some bring reserves; others simply bring their lamps.

In just three Sundays the season of Advent begins. It is the season in which the Church prepares for Christ's coming. We recognize that at times our faith is at a low ebb, we fall out of step, we run out of reserves. This parable offers the wise caution that we will miss any coming or visitation, any assurance of God's presence if we are not first prepared for the delay, for God's absence. The foolish maidens in the parable were ready for a coming, but not for a delay. Since they were unprepared, they missed the opportunity to meet the long awaited guest.

There will be seasons in our lives when God feels absent. There will be periods of drought when the stream of living water dries up. There will be spells of calamities which test our faith. Jesus' parable cautions us to build up a reserve supply to help us endure the difficult times when they come. Faith is not something that can be borrowed or loaned or purchased over the counter. Faith in God is a relationship of trust cultivated over time. The lamp of faith needs ongoing replenishment with an extra supply on standby for the dry spells.

John Westerhoff describes four primary stages of faith development. First is Experienced Faith during the younger years of childhood comprised mainly of imitation actions, such as singing songs or praying the Lord's Prayer, but without a full grasp of the meaning. The second stage is Affiliative Faith in which older children and early adolescents have a sense of belonging to a faith community where beliefs are nurtured. Older teens experience Searching Faith when they no longer blindly accept what others tell them but ask questions as they are seeking their identity. Finally Owned Faith is rare until early adulthood. It can only come

as a result of growing through Searching Faith. Owned faith is a strong, vital faith that guides one's living and is expressed through deeds of discipleship.<sup>ii</sup>

Affiliative Faith is an early stage in faith development, but borrowing the faith of our parents and grandparents will only take us so far in the journey. If we don't claim the faith for ourselves through questioning, searching, and practicing the disciplines of the faith, our lamp will remain empty. Our faith will be shallow, even meaningless. We may go through the motions of worship without absorbing the presence of God we are here to invoke. Prayer may be perfunctory, an obligatory nod to God, instead of a genuine tapping into the ever flowing presence of God's Spirit in our midst.

The U.S. Senate begins every session with a prayer, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance. Then the partisan bickering ensues. The prayer is led by Chaplain Barry C. Black, a Seventh-day Adventist who rose to the rank of rear admiral as a Navy Chaplain. His prayers typically call for unity, respect for one another, and reconciliation. Black is not disturbed by the fact that the Senate rarely heeds his petitions. The rancorous speeches made on the floor of the Senate are usually prepared before he gives his opening prayer, he says. Peter Marshall, Senate Chaplain in the 1940s, says he was the equivalent of parsley—just there for decoration.<sup>iii</sup>

If the lamp of faith is simply a cultural decoration in our lives, there won't be enough oil to sustain us through the difficult days when God seems absent. If prayer is simply parsley on top to give the semblance of faith, we will miss the appearance of the Holy Spirit when it moves among us.

In his best-selling book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell writes of the 10,000 hour rule. It is generally assumed that "Achievement is talent plus preparation. The problem with this view is that the closer psychologists look at the careers of the gifted, the smaller the role innate talent seems to play and the bigger role preparation seems to play."<sup>iv</sup>

"The idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice surfaces again and again in studies of expertise. In fact, researchers have settled on what they believe is the magic number for true expertise: ten thousand hours."<sup>v</sup>

The idea is that practice and preparation develops expertise. The same is true for our spiritual development. When we don't practice it, our lamps burn out. When we do prepare to meet God, we become adept at discovering God's presence in our midst. What might happen to our faith life if we apply the 10,000 hour rule – if we devote as much time to our spiritual lives as we do to developing a skill or an athletic competency or hobby or craft?

Jesus' parable encourages us to check our stockpile of faith before the next soul-quake hits. If we find ourselves without reserves, it won't be possible to

borrow anyone else's faith. If our lamp runs dry, we run the risk of missing out on the presence of God, who longs to accompany us through the storm. However, if we are practicing the faith, nurturing our spirits, we are likely to witness the advent of God in stillness and in storm, and find ourselves rejoicing in God's presence.

Loving God, we bring our faith lamps into your presence, mindful of their content. Some of our lamps are empty, drained of faith, hope, and love. We've shown up in desperation, yearning for even a whisper to quench the dry thirst. Some of us have a bit of oil to keep us going, but confess that we've neglected you and feel somewhat distant from your ever flowing stream of grace. Some of our lamps have sufficiently fueled that we are ready to see your in-breaking presence all around us. Into empty lamps, O God, renew a trickle of faith as a soothing balm to aching souls. Into neglected lamps, stir us to practice our faith on a daily basis so that it has meaning and vitality. From those lamps that are full, shine the light of hope into other lives that the spark of faith might be shared and kindled in those who long for your companionship.

We pray that the light of your love might shine into lives struggling to find their way in the world. Instill hope in those who are discouraged. Grant courage to those who are afraid. May those who are stumbling look to your lead. Move us, O God, to share our faith as a source of inspiration for others.

Shed your healing presence upon all who are wrestling with health challenges. We lift to you our own family members and friends, that they might experience your healing touch.... As our nation and many nations continue to deal with economic crisis, civil strife, and warfare, you know that the reserves of faith are tested. Enter into arenas of national and international tension with your calming, clarifying presence.

We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ, who comes that we might know your great love. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> John M. Buchanan, Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 25:1-13, in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, Kentucky, 2011), p. 286.

<sup>ii</sup> John H. Westerhoff, III *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1976, 2000).

<sup>iii</sup> Washington Post, September 21, 2011. Quoted in *Christian Century*, October 18, 2011, p. 8.

<sup>iv</sup> Macolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008), p. 38.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, p. 40.

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