



Sunday, November 8, 2020

Light Bearers

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles

Psalm 78:1-7; Matthew 25:1-13

In Western Pennsylvania, Westinghouse is a household name. George Westinghouse, the inventor extraordinaire, began his electric company in Pittsburgh in 1886. Three years before that, right here in Pittsburgh's East End, the first electric light was installed in a residence, by Westinghouse. The location? It was at the home of James Ross Mellon, at 410 North Negley Avenue in 1883. Before that time, light depended on gas, or oil, or candle power. And then everything changed.

Can we put ourselves back in the days of light bearers such as the ones we find in our Scripture lesson? Can we lift up insights to help us now? This parable Jesus told about being ready for the bridegroom makes us think of being ready for Jesus. In fact, it is often used as a Scripture during the season of Advent, as we watch and wait before Jesus arrives; however, our lectionary has placed us in advance of Advent — in advance of our celebration of Thanksgiving by several weeks. So I think we are to make of this that readiness is something we focus on at all times of the year. Being ready to see the Lord arrive; being ready to welcome Him; being ready to enter into the celebration — these things know no time or season.

In that regard we do not want to be like those foolish maidens who did not have enough oil to keep their lamps burning. You and I know people like that: people who never think ahead or plan ahead. People who are famous for being spontaneous — maybe even known for being easily distracted. People who amble along through life in a haphazard manner. People who would probably forget to take along with them the oil they need for their lamps. We may enjoy their company from time to time. Even so, we would not wish to identify with them, when it comes to matters of what we believe and how we put our faith into practice. Since that is the case, we will do what is needful, in order to have plenty of oil in our lamp of faith — in order to keep it burning, in order to see clearly as we keep watch, in order to not be oblivious as we wait, in order to be ready.

When I consider this parable of the wise and the foolish maidens, I am reminded of an absolutely gorgeous illustration by the artist Maxfield Parrish. It is titled "The Lantern Bearers." Parrish painted "The Lantern Bearers" in 1908 for the cover of *Collier's* magazine. The painting shows a group of people who are artfully arranged holding up softly glowing paper lanterns. The entire scene is illuminated, not by the sun, nor by the moon, nor by the stars, but by the light that each person is bearing. The picture is beautiful in and of itself — well worth enjoying. It is even more beautiful because it speaks about where this wonderful light is coming from — from right there, from each one of those light bearers. The light from within.

In the context of Jesus' parable, the light bearers play the important function of lighting the way to a celebration that will go on and on. Guess what? The light bearers are each of you. And all of you. You have this wonderful opportunity to bear the light of Jesus Christ into those places where it has not shined yet.

If we had been reading this particular parable 200 or 100 years ago, we might have thought, "This is a call to mission, a call to service, a call to action." It still is. It is a call to carry the light of Christ. Carry the light of Christ to others. Carry the light of Christ to a family member or a friend. Carry the light of Christ for those fleeing war and persecution, showing them the way to freedom — all the way to the foot of the cross. Carry the light of Christ to transform the world by your devotion, service, and witness. Carry the light of Christ with joy and thanksgiving, to faithfully share the hope that is in us. Carry the light of Christ into the world. Will you carry the light of Christ within you? Will you embody that light? Will you provide that light wherever you go? There are places where you go every day of your life, where you can. Bring the light of Christ into those places. Let it shine.

Did you notice that the bridegroom arrived at an unexpected hour? Did you hear that he appeared long after the foolish maidens had lost their light? And yet, those wise maidens still had the ability to shine theirs. Maybe you find yourself today in a place that is depressing and dismal — where the cause of Christ is not championed, where the forces of injustice seem to have won, where insensitivity reigns, where manipulative power is the norm. And it feels as if you have been there waiting, a long, long time. If we take a look at history, we know that, even in the darkest times, when the light seems to go out entirely, there are still those who bring the light of Christ to bear upon the scene. And that makes all the difference in the world. Light bearers. Jesus applies the title to Himself: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” The Dark Ages were truly dark. But they still gave way to the light. Today may seem just as dark. Always look for the light.

I have a flashlight in my home, and I know exactly where it is — which is good because, when the power goes out, even though I know my home pretty well, I look for the light. I want to see what is happening and where I am. So, before I go very far, I find the flashlight, turn it on, and that helps me get through the next minutes or hours or days — however long it takes, until the darkness goes away. It does me a lot of good. And it does everyone else in the house a lot of good. That light is great. But then again, there is that light of Christ, which is greater by far. The light of Christ does not depend on gas, or oil, or candle power — or electricity.

Here are some thoughts that come from what you know to be the light of Jesus Christ. In the light of this new day, you awakened in a community of faith. You awakened to a community of faith that celebrates diversity, equality, and inclusion. You awakened to a community of faith that believes the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about drawing the circle of His love larger and larger. You awakened to a community that builds bridges not barriers. You awakened to a community of grace, not judgment.

No matter what uncertainty you awakened to this Sunday morning, remember this: Christ loves you for who you are, just the way you are. Now, shine His light. The light of Christ depends on you. Let it shine! Amen.