

“Be the Church and Belong”
A, Pentecost 23; 10:00 am
Matthew 25:1-13; November 12, 2017
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

I. READY OR NOT!

Better get ready! Better get set! Go! Go where? To what?
Which direction? Where are we going?!

That is our gospel story today. The ten bridesmaids, waiting for the Bridegroom. Getting ready with great excitement for the party to begin! And five are described as wise. And five are foolish. But why?!

After all, they'd *all* gotten their bridesmaids dresses bought, fitted and pressed. Found *just* the right shoes for the night—pretty and sure to match the dress, yet comfortable enough to walk a ways in to the party *and* dance all night! Gotta be ready for dancing anytime!

They'd all cleaned and primed their lights, and were shining bright. They were **ready to go!** But going was not the problem. Lasting was. For the Bridegroom, darn him, took longer to get there than they'd expected. So much longer, in fact, they'd all taken a cat nap. And when Pokey Joe finally showed.....well.....five of them suddenly realized they weren't the Scouts they thought they were! They were *not* prepared.

Their lights were dim. They did not have the reserve tank, the extra oil, the recharger plug they needed to shine bright any more tonight.

II. WHAT ARE WE READY FOR?

Are YOU ready? Or even know what you're ready for? Are you ready to shine? Ready to party? Ready to dance into the night, into tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the next?

Or, is the reserve tank somewhere yet to be found? Still at the store? Forgotten at home? Maybe you've got an incompatible charger cord. Happens to us all sometimes!

III. AS YET UNREVEALED

Our banner we've used off and on these past months (thank you, Janet!) just *clinches* for me where life puts us at times, and where we are as a church right now.

We are in a *liminal* time—on the one hand we are grieving and honoring and missing those who are no longer with us. Yet, we are in a profound time too—as we are also exploring new horizons, and catching glimpses of where God is leading us on this journey into new dimensions.

Who we are together as a beloved community feels in some ways yet to be revealed. Just like the song, “Hymn of Promise”, says that this banner was inspired by:

**In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;
In cocoons, a hidden promise:
butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter
there's a spring that waits to be,
Unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.**

Unrevealed until its season.
The now and the not yet.

Who have we been in the centuries past that we *never* lose sight of—that we hold onto with our cloud of saints and bring into the now and the tomorrow? Who are we becoming as the Body of Christ in *this* time and place, on *this* season of our journey together in the Spirit?

I shared this sense of where we are as a community (both our congregation and our wider community of town and county) in the IGNITE gathering at La Foret last month. The leaders

were capturing the messages folks in the group were sharing, and writing them on the flip chart. Later, I noticed that Tennyson, the leader, had written my message up there, but not quite gotten it “right.”

He’d written “Unrevealed until it’s seasoned.”

Hmmm....my first thought was: That’s wrong! He’s got the grammar wrong. My second thought (like a lightbulb!) was, “That’s wonderful!” It’s both/and, all of the above.

“Unrevealed until its season” AND “unrevealed until it is *seasoned*.”

‘Cuz things often aren’t revealed to us, hit us over the head, or made clear on the path ahead, until a significant time of sitting with it, seasoning, percolating, gestating—pick your favorite metaphor!

IV. BE THE CHURCH AND BELONG

As we percolate, ponder, get ready for what “Being the church and belonging” means for us on the road ahead, it’s helpful to fully realize that we are NOT alone on this journey.

More is being written in an hour than one can hope to keep up with on this topic of: Why don’t people go to church anymore? Why are people “spiritual but not religious” and not want to be part of our community, like in the good old days?

Wes McAdams brings a helpful insight that we might take to heart:

[One of the] problems is that people see “church” as a weekly event to attend. Church is not something Christians attend when they get a chance. The church is who Christians are...every day of the week. Someone might say, “[It’s] just

semantics. You know what I mean when I say I’m going to church.” Sure, I know what you mean and I also know that a few generations of saying, “Going to church,” has contributed the current dilemma.

If you asked me, “What is family?” and I said, “Oh, that’s something I attend when I come home from work,” you would look at me like I lost my mind. My family is not an event I attend. My family is something I’m a part of – even when I’m somewhere else. If I started saying, “I’m going to *‘family’* now,” when I went home, it might very well change the way I see and interact with my family.

When people see the church as either an institution to support or an event to attend, it’s no wonder they see it as being irrelevant. If we want to see Christians stop checking out, we must start teaching people that **we are the church!**

I love you and God loves you, Wes McAdams

V. BE THE CHURCH OF?

Others would tell us that to “Be the Church” means certain things. It’s vital that we take it all in, accept the input, the suggestions, the ideas, and then ask *ourselves*: What kind of church do we want to be? Better yet, who are we already?

We have another banner that lives on the wall of our Fellowship Hall. Be the Church. (see below)

Does that fit for us? It's helpful to be open to many ideas on the table and chew on them together, deciding some to focus on at some times, and others to address another. Not rules to live by, but input to consider.

That's the beauty of a congregational church—we are not told how to be and how best to live out the gospel. We are encouraged on the journey to listen to the Still-speaking God and perceive the movement of the Spirit in our midst.

Phillip Gulley, author of "If the Church Were Christian" (which different folks here have been reading), sheds light on why some churches fail to connect with people or keeps them coming for the wrong reasons. Gulley points out—all too true too often, I'm afraid—how religions and churches can focus on humans' shortcomings and need of salvation, forgiveness, confession—you name it!—to an extent that ceases to be healthy. And definitely ceases to be Good News!

He grew up in such a church and kept encountering them in far too many places. Too much guilt, too many instances of shame and a judgmental God. People leaving the service "emotionally and spiritually bruised" as he puts it.

Truly, in our Christian tradition, an emphasis on Original Sin has *far* outweighed the biblical notion of Original Blessing in many times and places.

But, what's the alternative? Gulley paints a picture of what "being the church" can look like instead:

"[When] church and Christians take seriously our human potential, they begin creating communities that affirm and encourage all people. They give careful thought to the hymns they sing, rewriting the lyrics to better reflect God's inclusive love. Their prayers embody God's concern for all people and the delight and gift of human life and potential.

They take seriously the power of human intellect and reason. Those communities care less about keeping men and women in their supposed God-appointed places and care more about the divine life present in all.

"We could see ourselves and others as God does—beloved, accepted, valued, cherished, of infinite worth and potential. Churches would exist to help us comprehend and appreciate that reality, equipping and encouraging us to live freely, fully, and faithfully.

Leaders would not be valued for their ability to further the institution, but for their capacity to create soul-nurturing communities. Shame, blame, and spiritual tyranny would be things of the past, remnants of a fear-based religion whose precepts we have outgrown. No more life-diminishing churches.

It is long past time for the flowering of a life-giving Christianity. A spirituality that more accurately reflects the values and priorities of Jesus."

Life-affirming community. Is that us?

VI. FILLED WITH THE OIL OF FAITH

My friend and colleague, Rev. Tracey Dawson, tells a story about our scripture today, about a wedding she attended that never happened. Why? Because the Bridegroom never showed up! He literally got cold feet. His lamp was not filled and stoked until another, more fitting day and time.

Sometimes we are not ready for what's next. And, we need to sit with it. Practice the pause awhile. Tend our lamps, recharge our batteries and consider our role and our soul.

Tracey Dawson offers these words of encouragement to her congregation and ours (since, after all, we are not alone in these times!)

“My friend, the groom, indeed got cold feet. He wasn’t ready to be married that day; his torch did not have the necessary fuel to light the way for his bride-to-be’s procession to the marriage place. Eventually, with more preparation, more prayer, and more faith in the vows he was to speak to her, he did place the ring on her finger and say with conviction, “I do.”

And I think that’s what God really wants of us. I think that’s what Jesus was saying to his followers in this parable. I think the message is that we should not commit to Christianity lightly, without great thought and preparation. We never know when we will be called to be the world’s light bearer, so we need to constantly be filling our lanterns with the oil of faith, with the oil of devotion, and with the oil of investment in the sacred, in those life-giving connections—such as church—that we know we need in our lives.

I hope you feel that this church body—this place, these people, this message, and this unqualified welcome—is one of the soul-fired torches you need to light your path in life. I hope you will not spend your time idly waiting for Jesus to come back to earth and fix everything that is catawampus here, for you are the Jesus-light

already. You are the Jesus-light needed right here and now. You are the Jesus-light that others are straining to see today in the dark.

VII. UNREVEALED BUT READY

Are we ready?! Ready to be that light? That life-affirming community? Still unrevealed, perhaps, to a point, but ready to be seasoned and prepared?

Are we ready for the Bridegroom, with our lamps trimmed and our dancing shoes on? How’s the oil tank reserve?

Are we ready to *shine*? Ready to party? Ready to dance into the night, into tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the next?

Be the Church. Belong together, one in the spirit, one in the Lord. Amen.

