

**Ezekiel 34: 11-16**  
**Matthew 25: 31-46**  
**November 26, 2019**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**Christ the King Sunday**

Last week we heard Jesus give a parable about the wise and foolish bridesmaids. The wise ones brought extra oil for their lamps in case the bridegroom was delayed. The foolish ones did not and so were caught up short when the bridegroom arrived later than expected. This story led to a reflection on the significance of having lamps full of oil.

It the oil suggests sustaining expectation and anticipation in times when God's promises seem delayed or that God appears to be absent entirely-- a good message for the people when Jesus' return was delayed. Good words for us when most people have given up on Jesus' return entirely and have lost faith.

If all we had was the parable about lamps and oil, the message would nevertheless—to me at least—lack concreteness. What, after all, does it mean to carry a full lamp of hope? It's a bit. I don't know, too *spiritual*. I want some *practical* application.

Well friends, Jesus has anticipated our need for direct guidance.

When the Son of Man returns he will be interested in one thing and one thing only.

“So what did you *do* while I was away?”

I get the strong impression that he will not be impressed by our saying, “Well you took so long to get here we went back to what we were doing before you came.” Yet, more shockingly, I suspect he will also not be impressed by our saying, “Look! I have a lamp full of oil which I have been carrying about for years!”

Instead Jesus will scan the crowd and will call aside those who meet these criteria:

- I was hungry and you gave me food.
- I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.
- I was a stranger and you welcomed me.
- I was naked and you gave me clothes.
- I was sick and you took care of me.
- I was in prison and you visited me.

What saves this from being a job description for a social service agency is the personal element. *I* was hungry and you gave *me* food. And what is startling is that the ones who receive Jesus' praise are completely unaware that they have been serving Jesus. It is not self-conscious ministry that Jesus is looking for. Indeed, throughout his ministry Jesus has emphasized the importance of giving without expectation of recognition. The one who gives in secret will be rewarded in secret. Don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. It is unselfconscious love and service that Jesus teaches.

But more that this when Christ the King returns he wants to know who carried out his ministry in his absence? Who cared about the people that Jesus cared about while he was on earth? Who sought to remedy the conditions of human beings which so often lead many to believe that there is no God and thus live what Thoreau calls, "lives of quiet desperation?"

When Jesus returns he is not going to look for our lamps to be full of the oil of belief that he is coming back. He will want to know how that hope translated into active and engaged caring for the people he lived and died and rose from the dead to save.

It is how we express our *faith* in the way we *live* that is our witness of to his light. It is how our lives are patterned on that of Jesus that makes his love and grace visible to the world.

This is precisely what God through Ezekiel condemn the religious leaders of the day for *not doing*.

You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick;  
you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strayed;  
you have not sought the lost; but with force and harshness you have ruled them.

In the passage we heard this morning, God through Ezekiel announced that the official shepherds are fired. God himself will become the shepherd:

I myself will be the shepherd of the sheep and I will make them lie down,  
says the Lord God. *I will seek the lost. I will bring back the strayed and  
I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak...*

God promises to do this for two reasons.

The first is simply that God cares. In the Hebrew understanding, the essential nature of God is *chesed* which is translated as everlasting kindness and steadfast love. God forever seeks to restore humanity to the uncomplicated relationship we had with God at the beginning. Salvation is the restoring of humanity to our proper place in the scheme of things. It is why the Jewish mystics speak of God's intention for creation as *tikkun—the mending of the world*.

I am a Christian because I believe that in Jesus God has given us the way, the truth and the life which gives us both the opportunity to be the evidence of God's mending of the world—visible evidence of God's steadfast love, God's *chesed* in space and time.

This morning we have the opportunity to contribute to that evidence by supporting the livelihoods of women in Guatemala to earn a living wage for themselves and their families by purchasing their beautiful creations. We also have the opportunity of again supporting the efforts of our friends to free women in Malawi from the devastation of fistula and to empower

them to be witnesses in their villages. It does not take much thought to connect these efforts with the kind of things Jesus wants to see happening when he returns.

Yet witness such as this is difficult even on a good day. We compare the small amount which we are able to do against the massive scope of the world's brokenness and we wonder, "What difference does this make?" There are no easy answers and as we know the threat of compassion fatigue and burnout is a constant danger to those who seek to extend God's steadfast love and healing.

Being sustained in faith, hope and love in God's service relates to the second of God's reasons for becoming the shepherd of the sheep. It is this—that *humanity will recognize that God is the Lord. There is a power far greater than you and me who is able to do far more than we can ever imagine.*

And this is where the oil for lamps comes from. Our lamps are filled by realizing that we are part of the humanity that God cares about. God's steadfast love is for *you*. God is seeking to mend *your* life. God seeks to restore *you* to that wonderfully uncomplicated relationship with him of love and trust. As we cultivate the awareness that we are included in the warm embrace of God shown in Jesus we realize that there is nothing to be lost and everything to be gained by loving and serving Jesus in the guise of our sisters and brothers. Amen.