

This Little Light of Mine

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A Sermon Preached for Highland Baptist Church

Matthew 25:1-13

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“Why should we love our enemies?” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once asked in a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

“The first reason is fairly obvious,” King said. “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.”

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.”

But where does this light that King spoke of so often come from? Jesus says it comes from you and me. He said this quite simply to those gathered for the Sermon on the Mount when he looked out toward them and said, “YOU are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a basket, so let your light shine, like a city on a hill that cannot be hid.” Notice that doesn’t give us instructions on how to become the light, or a list of qualifications we must meet before he will begin billing on our divine electric account. He says it plain and simple, “You *are* the light of the world.”

But friends, if we take Jesus’ words and King’s words seriously, if darkness cannot drive out darkness – *only light* can do that – and if you and I have this light *within us*, then this divine spark within our souls, is perhaps the most valuable, most important, most precious, most sacred part of who we are. And I believe it is incumbent upon us, as bearers of God’s light – to tend to the flame that is within us at all costs.

And so the question I’d like for us to consider together today is this: how do we do that? How do we tend to this light that God has entrusted to each of us?

Perhaps we can read the Gospel Reading today as a response to that question. Jesus tells a story one day and says that the Kingdom of God is like ten young maidens who took oil lamps and went out in the night to greet their bridegroom. But five of them were foolish, and five were wise. The five who were wise brought extra jars of oil, knowing that the oil in their lamps wouldn’t last, so they had plenty stored up to keep their lamps burning long into the night. The five who were foolish, did not.

When the bridegroom didn’t show up when they had expected and the night lingered on, everyone fell fast asleep. Until suddenly, in the middle of the night, someone yelled out, “He’s coming! He’s almost here! Hurry! Let’s get ready!” So the ten maidens quickly jumped out of bed and started to get their lamps burning.

But the foolish maidens realized their lamps wouldn't light; they hadn't saved up enough oil. They began to ask the other maidens to share some oil with them, but the wise maidens said no, there wouldn't be enough to go around. They would need to go out and buy their own.

So they scurried off frantically – and while they were away -- the bridegroom came. Everyone who was there to greet him was welcomed into the wedding feast, but after that, the door was locked. “Therefore, keep awake,” verse 13 says, “for you know neither the day nor the hour when he might arrive.”

It's interesting to me that parable ends with the instruction to keep awake, because everyone in the story, whether they are called wise or foolish, falls asleep. And they aren't faulted for it, either. It seems to me that the issue isn't whether or not they are awake – it's whether or not they are *prepared*. Whether or not they have enough oil for their lamps to be able to welcome the bridegroom when he comes.

Now, we might think that the wise maidens should have been willing to share their oil with those who needed more. Wouldn't that have solved this whole fiasco, and everyone could have gone to the wedding feast together?

After all, didn't Jesus teach us earlier in Matthew that if anyone wants to take our coat, we should give them our cloak as well? He said to give to everyone who begs from you, and not to refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. Are the maidens just being stingy with their oil here?

But I love how David Garland explains what's happening. He says, “One might think that the wise maidens should have shared their supply of oil with those who were ill-provided, but this parable is...about spiritual preparedness, not about the golden rule. And spiritual readiness is not something that can be transferred from one to another. The point is that one must take steps to furnish oneself with oil before going to sleep.”

And I think Garland's words here are so true. Try as we might, we can't do spiritual work for one another. We can't do each other's homework in the Kingdom of God. Sure, we can teach. We can share. We can encourage. We can offer wisdom and insight. We can point the direction and light the way. But there comes a time for all of us in our spiritual journeys when there is inner work that only we can do.

Which is especially clear right now, isn't it, when so many of the ways in which our community would normally help to feed our lamps and light the way for one another are no longer feasible. Especially right now, it's up to us to stay close to the source of the light, and no one else can do this work for us.

Friend's it has been a week, hasn't it? I admit that I had originally planned to preach on the Amos passage today – and God's call to “let justice roll down like ever-flowing streams of water.” It's a beautiful and important passage of Scripture. And no matter what the results

of the election had been this week – our work is still cut out for us, is it not? That message came in loud and clear this week.

And as I, like many of you, stayed up late into the night most evenings this week awaiting the results of the election, looking at endless maps and projections and tallies of votes, I was reminded of something: I was reminded that if you and I are really going to do the hard and holy work of justice that God is calling us to do – then some of the most important spiritual work that we can do is to keep our lamps burning for the long nights that are ahead of us.

The question is, what will this work look like for you, and for me?

Last year, during the season of Advent, I had an idea for worship. Each week, I wanted to light a candle from the Advent wreath, and at the end of worship, I would walk to the back of the sanctuary carrying this candle with me as I gave the benediction. I wanted to visually communicate our calling to carry this light with us into the world.

Well, it was a beautiful idea in theory, but it was pretty awkward the first week when I actually tried to do it. Because, as was my normal practice, I was also holding my Bible, my worship folder, my notes and reminders for after worship, and a hand-held microphone, and I suddenly as I began to give the benediction, I realized I didn't have an extra hand to carry the candle. If I really wanted to do this, if I really wanted to carry the light, I knew I was going to have to set some things down – to let some things go, in order to do it.

After I set some of my stuff down and got that sorted out, I started sauntering down the aisle at a fairly quick pace to get to the back of the room when I looked down and realized that the flame had almost gone out because I was moving too quickly. I stopped in the middle of the aisle and realized that I would have to slow down – to take one step at a time, and to walk much more intentionally - in order to keep the flame burning.

And then, people began to look at me kinda funny because I was walking so slowly down the aisle – couldn't I hurry things up so that they could get out and go to lunch already? (Do you all remember the days when we used to go to lunch together after church?!)

And perhaps, that's how the world may look at us – when we choose to do things differently, when we set different priorities, when we make different choices – in order to tend to the flame within us. And maybe that is okay.

You see, in these 60 seconds of learning to carry a candle with me down the aisle, I quickly realized that all of these things would be true for us if we hoped to carry this light beyond the walls of the church, too.

For instance, are there things you need to let go of in order to tend to the light that is within you? What all are you carrying these days – and what might you need to set down in order to tend to your soul?

Or, are there ways you need to slow down – to go about your day or your week more intentionally? Are there better boundaries you need to set, priorities you need to keep, in order to keep your light burning? Are there spiritual practices you want to incorporate into your life that help tend to the fire within you?

Are there people whose very presence and friendship in your life adds fuel to the flame – and, likewise, are there people who sometimes take away your oxygen, making it hard for your light to keep flickering? Friends, how might we, like the maidens in Jesus story, best be prepared with oil to keep our lamps burning long into the night?

I can't tell you the answers to these questions. I think they look differently for all of us, and they change in different seasons of life, too. What I can tell you is that learning to tend to our inner light is, I believe, the most important spiritual work you and I will ever do.

And as a pastor friend of mine, Kyndall Rothaus, once said in a sermon, "I think in the daily grind, we almost forget that we are handling fire by mingling with God and by brushing shoulders with the people of God. There is this extraordinary power in our bodies – call it spirit, call it resurrection, call it the light that shines in the darkness, call it the face of Jesus Christ - but it has been entrusted to us, and it is by God's mercy that the fire hasn't burnt us all up into ash.

The only things we can really do as fire-handlers are to keep a lookout for burning bushes as we walk through life. To add fuel to the flames. To be reverent before a blaze. And to never ever ever substitute anything counterfeit for the real spark. You have to strike a match beneath your soul to do the work of God."¹

And so, how do we go about striking that match for the long nights that are ahead of us? This is something, I believe, Martin Luther King and many other civil rights leaders knew how to do so well. They knew they needed to light a match beneath their souls to fight the darkness they were up against. And often times, they would do so by singing.

Civil Rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer was best known for singing "This Little Light of Mine" at the end of all of her speeches as she fought for voting rights – it was her signature song. As one person observed, "you've never heard a room flying [like one] that Fannie Lou Hamer set afire. And [After she was finished,] you never needed to hear anybody else speak again."²

Overtime, the song became an incredible act of resistance in the Civil rights movement, which might seem odd - to call such an innocent-sounding song defiant. But that's exactly how blues singer Bettie Mae Fikes says she felt when creating her classic version of "This Little Light of Mine" in 1963. She improvised the lyrics after a protest in which several of her friends had been attacked.

¹ Kyndall Rothaus, "The Blaze," <https://www.mixcloud.com/thetruettseminarypodcast/kyndall-rae-rothaus-the-blaze/>

² Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*

"I'm thinking to myself, 'How is the light [going to] shine, when they're trying to put our lights out?' She said. "So I just started adding our oppressors to the song. '*Tell Jim Clark, I'm gonna let it shine,*' And as I added my oppressors, other people in the audience began to shout out: 'Tell the KKK!' 'Tell the president!' It was like being set free."

And the song continues to be significant in civil rights movements to this day. In 2017, a group of clergy and counter-protestors confronted the crowd of white supremacists and white nationalists who were marching and chanting with flags and tiki torches in Charlottesville, Virginia.

"We had originally said we were going to stand by silently," Reverend Osagyefo Sekou said, "but [they] were marching past us cursing and yelling homophobic slurs at us, and we wanted to change the atmosphere. I knew a song that could do that. So I just broke out into "This Little Light Of Mine."

In this beautiful moment, that was actually captured on video, clergy and other protesters are shown standing in a line, their singing rising over chants of white nationalists screaming "You will not replace us." And as the song continued, "The tensions went down ... and it shook them," Sekou said. "They didn't know what to do with that joy. But we weren't going to let the darkness have the last word."³

Friends, we have seen darkness this week. But we have also seen the collective power of so many little lights, haven't we? And if we are going to be people who keep up the work of actively fighting against the darkness, we must tend to this little light we have within us. We never know where or when we may need it – but we always need to have our lamps ready, available to pull out of our pockets at a moment's notice.

Now, you all know by now that I like to sing, and I'm sure some of you are expecting me to start singing "This Little Light of Mine." But instead of signing it today, I'd like for us to listen to the passion and the courage and the boldness of Fannie Lou Hamer as she sings it. As one person observed, "Nobody sang 'This Little Light of Mine' as Fannie Lou Hamer sang it."

And so let's listen to Fannie together. Who knows, maybe the song will light a match beneath us, too.

Recording of "This Little Light of Mine" by Fannie Lou Hamer:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhiV6DB h 8>

³ <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/06/630051651/american-anthem-this-little-light-of-mine-resistance>