

This sermon was written by Rev. Gary Smith for the First Congregational Church

Running low on Fuel?

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Matthew 25:1-13

Does your car need fuel today? What does your gas gauge read this morning? I noticed mine on the way to church this morning and saw that I had less than a ¼ of a tank. Do you wait until your gauge is on empty before filling or do you fill up when you have ½ a tank? With gas prices falling I wait till I have to have gas before filling. In 1968 in Burley, Idaho a new gas pump was installed that offered 24 hr. self-serve cash only. Late one night driving home I was running out of gas and stopped, inserted a five-dollar bill and my car would not take all of that gas. As teenagers we would put one or two dollars of gas in the tank so that our parents would not know that we had been dragging main.

Have you ever run out of gas? I confess I have many times. I must be a slow learner because last year I wanted to burn the old fuel in a convertible car that was going to sit in the garage all winter and I wanted to find out if the car had a low fuel light. It did not and I ran it out of gas before I got home. Fortunately, I was already in my subdivision and only had to push it a short distance. Has anyone else had a similar experience?

Our scripture this morning directs our attention to bridesmaids whose lamps ran out of fuel before the bride groom arrived. This is a parable of Jesus that seems unnatural to us because their traditions were very different from our own. It is a story of a first century Jewish wedding and their customs. The Interpreter's Bible says, "The high point of the wedding came when the bridegroom took the bride from her father's house to their new home..."

This would be done at night with great fanfare as the wedding party marched through town and the community would come out of their houses and join in the parade to the new home where the wedding reception was waiting. In the story the groom has been delayed and it is midnight before he begins the procession. Five of the maids did not bring any extra oil for their lamps and their lamps went dim. They wanted to borrow oil from the others who had brought extra but they rightfully said if we give you ours we will not have enough either. So the five went to town to buy fuel and missed not only the arrival of the groom but the wedding reception as well.

The nearest comparison I thought of was how we celebrated weddings in Burley in the 1960's. After a wedding we would jump in our cars and chase after the bride and groom who were in their car that we had decorated and tied tin cans the bumper. We would be tooting our horns all the way through town. Then we would break the chase off. (Fred, did you check the gas gauge? Do we have enough to get home?)

Now to be true to the text, I must relay the intent of what Matthew has recorded Jesus saying. This parable is part of a series of stories about the end times when Jesus will return to claim his kingdom. There can be no doubt that originally the message was to be prepared for the Lord's coming because no one knows the day or hour of his return.

Scholars think that Matthew added the part about the bridegroom being delayed because the early church believed that Jesus was going to return immediately at least during their lifetime. When he did not, there was a need to address this delay. Jesus' delay in returning led to a new emphasis of preparedness, for and when he returns. Will we be ready and prepared for his arrival? They were frustrated with his delay like we are of defeating COVID, and discovering a working vaccine, or maybe like the frustration with the time it has taken to hire a permanent pastor.

We still believe in the second coming, the return of Jesus to earth to claim his church and bring the kingdom of God to completion. There is also another way to interpret Jesus' return. When we die I believe we meet Jesus immediately face to face. Therefore, I must be ready and prepared for my own arrival with him. Maybe the message is "Live every day as if it was your last and someday you will be right." The scriptures proclaim that Jesus will return and claim his kingdom. Some think that Jesus is speaking to the church in symbolic language. Jesus is the groom and the bride is his church. If this is the case, then Jesus is addressing us as a community of faith reminding us that he is calling us to be faithful and live in that kingdom of God now by our actions in service to the world about us.

Personally, I think Jesus is asking us to examine our spiritual lives and see if we are running low on spiritual fuel. So often we get caught up in administrative duties and get burnt out. We run low on spiritual fuel. Just as our energy level lowers as we age so does our spiritual level. We need to refuel by connecting to an accepting community of faith, be inspired by a special worship experience together, challenged by a sermon, hear the scripture speak to us in our deepest need and discover Christ's presence is among us, with us, within us.

I heard of a new expression describing a way to be aware of Christ's presence. It is a different spiritual discipline called, "Rummaging for God." No, it is not about garage sales. Rummaging for God is a way of finding God's presence in our lives. We do this when we go to bed and recall the events and people we encountered during our day and think of how God was there in what transpired and was spoken to us. God is not in some distant place but right here reaching out to us in our needs and ministering through us to bring the reign of God on earth, as it is in heaven.

What we all need is a refueling, a top off for our spiritual lives. I have always enjoyed that chorus, based on this scripture, "Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, burning, burning. Give me oil in my lamp I pray, halleluiah, give me oil in my lamp keep me burning, burning, burning; Keep me burning till the break of day."

And if you can't relate to the lamp image, you may add the verse the youth enjoy, "Give me gas for my ford, keep me truck'in for the Lord, or wax for my board keep me surf'n for the Lord."

There are times and places in our lives when our spiritual fuel is depleted, when we experience unanswered prayer, estranged relationships, doubt, injustice. In such times don't give in to despair. Sometime you may feel that Jesus has been delayed but he is there ministering to your needs.