

Trish King  
2<sup>nd</sup> Service

Good Morning. First of all, I want to thank Rev. Andy for letting me speak to you today. I think it's safe to say that in some small way, every Sunday at Bering is special. But this is really a special day. A day of baptism and a day of birthday celebration. A day of ceremony. A day when we recognize the member who has been with us the longest, and the day that we recognize our newest and youngest member. A day of beginnings and a day of remembrance.

In our Gospel lesson today we are told about ten bridesmaids. They are getting ready for a special occasion, too. Only instead of a celebrating a birthday or a baptism these bridesmaids are getting ready for a wedding. Now, we don't know a whole lot about marriage ceremonies at the time of Jesus, but it's probably safe to assume that grooms might have to travel a bit to claim their bride. And, if the groom was traveling at night, it would be essential for the wedding party to light the way with lamps. (Sort of like that journey to the Ranger talk that we were talking about earlier.)

Now, when I found out that I was preaching today and I looked at what I thought was the lectionary gospel for today, my first reaction was, Oh, great. There are a lot of reasons why I find this section of scripture a bit annoying. Many translations refer to the ten women as "virgins" instead of bridesmaids. Taken out of its context and period, this story reeks of patriarchy. When I read about ten bridesmaids waiting on a bridegroom, I get horrible images of that TV show called the Bachelor. In this show, 25 women vie for the affections of one man. In their quest to land the supposed catch of the day, they engage in all sorts of ridiculous and demeaning behaviors. It's really not much of a departure from the female as property concept, and this show is still on! I looked it up on the internet, and there are all sorts of gory details about everyone on the show. I stopped reading when I got the part about the woman with the webbed toes. Just way too much information. Anyway, it's one of those shows that is useful only to show your daughters the absurdity of it all.

I'm going to submit to you today that that the parable of the ten bridesmaids isn't really about the bridesmaids at all. It's all about the lamps, and the way that those lamps

might be an instrumental part of hope. It's about getting those lamps ready for all the things, both joyous and challenging, that life holds in store. Each and every one of you has a lamp, and my question for you today is, how is that lamp working for you? Is your lamp well prepared? Is your lamp ready to offer light in the midst of darkness?

Ancient lamps at the time of Jesus looked something like this. They had a vessel that held oil, and they had a wick that stuck out of them like this. To get the lamp ready to burn you had to trim the wick. This was really important. Trimming the wick served the dual purpose of eliminating smoke and allowing the flames to burn brighter. The old burnt part of the wick had to be trimmed away. What a metaphor for our lives. To get our lamp to burn effectively, we have to get rid of the stuff that we don't need anymore, that old burnt up stuff that holds us back. Stop counting the ways that people have hurt you, and let go of your woundedness a bit. It's time to get rid of the old stuff that keeps you from burning brightly. It's time to get rid of the self condemnation and the guilt. Cut it away. Get rid of the stuff that holds you back. Get rid of despair and the absurd idea that you have done something that God can never forgive you for. You are loved, and you are forgiven. Cut the rest away, and get your lamp ready.

Next, get some fuel for your lamp. First of all, pray like crazy. The author Ann Lamott says that frequently the best she can do is pray "help me, help me" or "thank you, thank you." That's a great start. It doesn't have to be eloquent or persuasive or held up to some sort of idealistic standard that you have for prayer. Just do it. The fact is, prayer changes you. I have a dear friend who is a Benedictine monk. He has been immersed in a life of prayer for most of his 67 years. What he will tell you about prayer is that it creates of life full of new beginnings, even when things seem all out of sorts and confusing. Brother Kevin says that the honest lament of desperation is a wonderfully wholistic prayer, one that we as human beings desperately need. Look at the Psalms for some great examples of honest prayers of lament and desperation. But the kind of prayer that really pushes you a bit, the kind of prayer that really grows you, is always prayed, as Brother Kevin says, with an "attitude of gratitude." Prayer done with an attitude of gratitude reorients us into remembering who we really are. We are people who are loved by the One who created us. To thank God in the midst of difficulties is to remember who God really is, the One who is indeed working in the midst of all things for Good. Praying with

an attitude of gratitude invites that peace that passes all understanding, that peace that comes only when we fully trust God.

Third, read the bible. Now, I know that this isn't always an easy thing to do. The bible is violent and sexist and heterosexist and sometimes just horrifyingly mean. Sounds a lot like the world we live in, doesn't it? Life isn't easy, and sometimes reading the bible isn't easy either. Do it anyway. God lives and moves in the midst of all the words and all of the messiness of the bible. The best working theology of biblical interpretation trusts in the presence of a loving, creative, redemptive, life-giving God. When you read something that makes you squirm a bit, trust God. Only God can create redemption FOR those words, and Only God can create redemption FROM those words. Only God can use the messiness of the Bible to make the words become incarnate, living and breathing and working among us.

Fourth, and this is the part of lamp filling that I want to focus on the most today, is to be a part of Christian community. Today we've witnessed one of the wonders of Christian Community. Baptism. Isn't it extraordinary to witness a baptism, to welcome Tonya and little Grant into our community of believers? God's love comes to us in the form of the Holy Spirit, which is poured out. Just like water. And we welcome Tonya and Grant as new members of our Christian community. There is something wonderful about watching baptismal water trickle over a baby's little head. God revealed to us in the beauty of ceremony. God comes in the mystery of water.

On the same day that we welcome the youngest member of our community, we celebrate the 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday of our oldest member. I had the joy of getting to visit with Ruth last Friday. Ruth has been a member of Bering since she was a little girl. Ruth used to serve the church by volunteering in the nursery, which used to be called the Cradle Roll area. She used to take care of a lot of babies here at Bering. Wouldn't it be nice to see a lot of babies here again? Ruth taught Sunday School here at Bering for many years. She told me that Bering has never been just a church. It has been a family of service. Isn't that wonderful. A family of service.

Ruth's life hasn't always been an easy one. Her husband died when she was only in her mid-40's, leaving her a very young widow. It has not been a perfect life, but it has been a full one, sustained by the grace of God.

You know, there is a problem with thinking that the Christian life is an easy one. That's the philosophical and theological commitment that is driving a lot of our megachurches today. Life will be good and we will be richly blessed (and yes, even monetarily blessed) if we discern God's will for our lives and follow it. God just wants us to be happy. Isn't the world a nice place when we can put things in a nice logical package like that. Good stuff will happen. How nice. How logical. How fair.

This sort of picture about how the world works is absurd, and healthy Christian community knows that. I would suggest that Christians who believe that Christianity is an easy life read the bible. I would suggest that they read the Gospels and then tell us how the life of Christ was ever an easy one. Real Christian community knows suffering. Real Christian community knows the fullness of our human existence, with marginalization and illness and death and addiction and human brokenness.

Two weeks ago my family and I attended the funeral of a beautiful fifteen year old girl. She was a member of my kid's youth group, an enthusiastic participant in weekly bible study, and a member of our annual week long mission trip. Her Dad is one of the youth leaders. Her parents are wonderful people. She was gorgeous, smart, and popular. The day before she died, she jumped on my son's back and goofed around with him as usual, even telling him that she was going to marry him someday.

The next day, she committed suicide. One week after her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, Sydney committed suicide. We have no answers. You know, sometimes life is like that. Devastating things happen, things that tear us up inside. Life deals us horrible, agonizing blows – cancer, an HIV diagnosis, a sudden death of a loved one. We are baffled by tragedy, and we ask why. Ladies and gentlemen, I have no answers. When the tragic, inexplicable events come, we never have answers or explanations enough to soften the way they tear us up inside.

C.S. Lewis, in his book titled "A Grief Observed" writes; "nobody ever told me that grief felt so like fear." I thought it extraordinary that a Christian writer would admit to that moment of paralysis, that moment of being so very afraid of the dark. Thank you, C. S. Lewis. Let us never hide behind our Christianity and pretend that this stuff doesn't wound us deeply. Let us never pretend that we have no fear of the dark. But let us always claim that the darkness will not overcome us.

It is a community of believers that is lighting the way for Sydney's family. They are surrounded by people who love them. We can't understand the depth and breadth of their grief, but we can be present with them, and we can cry with them. This community of believers is shining their collective lights with encouragement, sympathy, and compassion. And Sydney's family has kept their lamps prepared. They are people of faith, people of hope.

What is unique to Christian community is our testimonies of love and hope in the midst of loss. Our hope is placed in God, who promises us a future, who promises us life beyond this world. We are a people who have been saved - not saved from the difficult journey of life, but saved for union with Christ. We rejoice in our hope. We are filled with the peace that does indeed fall outside of our intellectual understanding. And I can say with confidence, my friends, that this isn't all there is. We are blessed with a God who loves us - always, even till the end of the world.

In the midst of Christian community we share our sorrows. In the midst of Christian community we share our stories of evolution and change and reclamation. We come together to worship God and proclaim that God is indeed in the midst of it all. Memory and story fit together to tell the stories of our lives, and how God has found us, again and again. And we walk together, knowing that while life isn't easy, it's worth every step. Ruth is the matriarch of her family now. She has grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. When I asked her what advice she would give for those who are raising children, she said, "Just love them." Doesn't that just say all. I imagine that in about seven months or so Mr. Grant will start to take his first steps. He may need all of you for some balance and stability. He may need you to make him feel just a bit more secure in his steps. Give him your hand. Just love him.

In the midst of all of the difficulties, the challenges of life, to love is risky. Do it anyway. To read the bible is risky. There are parts that are brutally honest, and there are parts that are just plain brutal. Read it anyway. Let God's word be a lamp for your feet and a light for your path. To be part of a worshipping Christian community, one that claims and proclaims the light, might mean that you have to drag yourself to this place of sanctuary early in the morning when you would rather be sleeping. Do it anyway. That collective light will shine in the dark when the darkness seems overwhelming. Our lamps

will become an instrument of light, a testimony to the love and hope of Jesus Christ.  
You'll be ready when the darkness comes. And your lamp will be a light to the world.  
A-men.