

Keep Me Burning

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 10, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

A couple years ago I was at Ames with a shopping cart full of Christmas gifts. I waited patiently in a long line to get checked out. It seemed to take hours. I waited so long that I had time to read the National Enquirer and the Ladies Home Journal. Finally, I reached the check out counter. Every item was rung up. "Will this be cash or charge?" I reached for my wallet and I realized that I changed pants and left my wallet at home. NO cash! No credit card! "Fool", I heard someone whisper to her child several customers behind me. "Yea, I think he's the Presbyterian minister", someone else whispered.

~~The Bible says it's foolish to be unprepared... to lack foresight... and especially when it comes to grieving Jesus Christ,~~
In the Bible, foolishness has nothing to do with lack of intelligence. It's a moral category. God judges people morally responsible for being fools, for not using your head. Take the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. ^{The bridegroom is Christ. The church must be prepared in the event that Christ's return is delayed. The foolish will be shot out...} The foolish bridesmaids weren't stupid. They simply didn't bring reserve amounts of oil to light the bridegroom's path - in spite of the fact that all the virgins were aware that the bridegroom might be delayed. Lamps without oil simply become useless ornaments.

Our church building is like a lantern. Last Wednesday I came by the church to pick up Kay from bell choir practice. The church was lit up like a beautiful lantern. ~~The parking lots were full.~~ Nearly every room was lit up with activity. Cub scouts filled the Christian Education building. One room was

being used to teach singing lessons. The sanctuary was filled with bell choir members leaving and chancel choir members coming. Earlier, young people came and went to choir practices and enjoyed snacks in the fellowship hall. Earlier still, before daybreak, the fellowship hall was lit up for a few of us gathered to pray. From dawn to late at night this church was shining for Jesus. And I thought, "I hope our church always shines for Jesus. I hope we have the resources to keep our lights burning." ^{with} ~~Jesus comes again.~~

I got a letter from a young girl who lives here in Oxford. She wants to go to Russia and distribute careboxes containing food, vitamins and school supplies, along with a children's Bible Story Book and other Christian literature to Russian school children. "The reason I am writing", she said, "is to ask you to prayerfully consider helping me financially." And then she writes, "We both know that it doesn't cost anything to send someone to Heaven, but, it does cost to send someone to tell them how to get there."

That last sentence really got me. It doesn't cost anything to go to heaven. God's grace is a free gift through faith in Jesus Christ. But it takes thousands of dollars to light up this building with activities that lead men and women to Christ. It takes money to buy Bibles to give to children. It costs to help the Neighborhood Service Center minister to homeless and hungry people in the community. It costs to buy Sunday School books and materials. It costs to send out the Lamplighter and print up bulletins. ^{to keep the congregation informed of our ministries} It costs to send young people to Christian camps and conferences like Camp Donegal and the Great Escape and the Urbana

Missionary Conference that Suzi Jefferis will be attending. And next year there's even a possibility, the Lord willing, to take a group of high school kids to a work project in Nicaragua under the direction of a Young Life leader there. It's a possibility, but we need oil to keep the lamps burning. The church is called, not to curse the darkness all around us, but to trim our lights,

to have plenty of oil with us to light the way to the heavenly banquet. ^{lawn mower... The problem is not with the lawn mower... it simply needs gas... and we had the gas}

~~This church is like no movement... we need fuel... we have access to the resources of the world to prosper... if it... we have access to the resources of the world to prosper... if it...~~
I need your support. I need you to support my ministry here

in Oxford financially and prayerfully. For one thing, I need you to make a commitment to worship ^{help} with God's people regularly - not once a month or when you feel like it - but every week. That should be a priority. You need to come to worship every Sunday

whether you feel like it or not - only then will you have the spiritual resources to let your lights shine for Jesus. And you need to come to Sunday School or participate in some other way - ^{sound system} in the choir, in a youth group, in a small group Bible study or ^{many, many opportunities} prayer group. You need to participate faithfully in order to have the spiritual resources we need. It's foolish for anybody to think otherwise.

And, finally, you need to contribute financially to the work and worship of the church. I believe you should tithe - give one tenth of your income to the work of Christ through the church. I urge you to think about what you give. Think about it! Don't just thoughtlessly jot down on your pledge card the first figure that comes to your head. That's a foolish thing to do.

I have absolutely no doubt, no doubt whatsoever, that this congregation has the financial resources to keep our church lit, lighting the way to Christ. ^{Do we have the spiritual resources... if not we know where to stock up... worship, study, service} By God's grace we'll be wise and not foolish - we'll make sure that we have, not only a beautiful lamp in this church building, but also adequate supplies of oil to keep it burning to the break of day.

Let us pray: