

Be A Light

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from Christ Jesus our Lord who gives us the fuel to keep our lamps burning. Amen.

When you're starting something new, it's always important to know how exactly to jump in. You can dip your toes in the water, gradually getting acquainted and getting more deeply involved. Or, you can jump in with both feet, right into the deep end, and just start swimming and hope for the best.

True wisdom involves knowing how to avoid diving into a shallow pool, or inching your way across when you need to move quickly.

As I've grown in years, I'd like to think I've gotten good at figuring out which is which. But for me, I'm always still a little bit leery of jumping right in. Too many times in my life, I've gone hot and heavy into something new only to find that my interest, or my passion, or my energy, fizzled all too quickly.

It's called burnout. And I know it's not something I have the market cornered on.

It's a pattern that's easy to see in all sorts of different people, in all different areas of life. Whether it's a new hobby, or an organization they've belonged to for years, people start out with a flicker of interest, a spark of passion, a flame of energy, and over time, whatever fuels that burning gets used up. Maybe the person got too into the thick of it from day one, or they simply failed to pace themselves, to refuel and take care. They get to a point where the fuel, the energy, is just not there, and whatever flicker was left burns out.

You see it in hobbies, and clubs, and even careers. And as a pastor, unfortunately, I tend to see it in patterns of people's church participation. Faithful church members who were aflame for Christ simply lose their spark. Maybe they'd been burning dimmer and dimmer, slowly distancing themselves for a while, without anyone noticing, or maybe they started out hot and burnt through everything they had quickly.

One way or another, they get burnt out.

And it's not just about whether they participate in committees or teams, or volunteer for special projects. Sometimes, it goes the whole way to their faith itself. We all need the bright light of Christ in our lives, but sometimes people reach the darkest part of night and find that there just isn't fuel there. The flame has burnt out.

Burnout is real. It happens in our faith and in so many other avenues. And if we don't take care of ourselves, if we don't pay attention to the fuel we have, it will leave each of us in the dark sooner or later.

Maybe you're feeling burnt out in some part of your life or your faith right this very moment.

I think it's possible to hear Matthew's Gospel for today as a warning *against* burnout.

In the parable, the bridesmaids are waiting to escort the bridegroom into a great and wonderful wedding feast. They didn't know how long they'd be waiting. It was part of tradition for the arrival to be somewhat unexpected, much like waiting for the bridal party to arrive at a modern reception. And it was also an understood piece of the puzzle that they might be waiting for a long time, that maybe the bridegroom would unintentionally delay their return in order to make a more extravagant entrance.

As the story goes, half of the bridesmaids were wise and ready for this extended wait. And half were foolish and where not.

Remember, Jesus is telling this parable right before his entrance into Jerusalem; he knows the end is near. And Matthew is writing it, re-telling it for a community that is impatiently waiting for Christ's return. He's encouraging people to keep the faith, to be patient, to be wise, to not use up all of their fuel.

To not burn out.

In all of my life, I've only ever completely run out of fuel in a car once. I was with my dad, in his truck, and he was insistent that we had enough fuel to make it where we needed to go. And then, sure enough, just a few miles short of the closest gas station, it sputtered to a stop.

I'd like to say that I learned from that experience, but I tend to cut it close, too. According to Ford, my 2015 Ford Edge has an 18 gallon gas tank, and when I've saved up Giant Eagle fuelperks and have ten, or twenty, or thirty cents off a gallon, I want to make the most of that discount, I try to run it as empty as possible.

But all too often, that leads to close calls, it leads to moments where I almost burn every ounce of fuel left in the car. And I have to weigh the desire to save money against the desire to be prepared. Prepared to have a full tank of gas in the winter when that extra bit of weight helps with traction in the snow. Prepared to have enough gas to take me to an emergency call with the fire department in the middle of the night, or to a hospital to visit a sick and suffering parishioner.

In order to be ready for all of that, in order to be prepared, I can't just burn out all the fuel in my car. I can't run it hard and expect to still have fuel left for a long trip. I have to pace myself. I have to top it off.

Our lives of faith are the same way...

We want to make the most of our time on earth as disciples, but sometimes we have to pace ourselves. We have to remind ourselves that we can't do everything perfectly all the time. We have to keep in focus that the only perfect disciple was the one whom we are disciples *of*.

But more than that, we *have* to refuel. We have to top it off. We can't just hope that the little bit we have will carry us through, we need to be ready for a long journey, *constantly*.

In order to have a light that is always shining bright to help others find their way to Christ's banquet, in order to make sure that we ourselves always have fuel for the journey, we have to be diligent about when and how we refuel.

We need to seek hope and comfort in the scriptures and the sacraments. We need to seek mutual support in communities of faith, groups of believers, like this one here.

It would be so easy to burn out right now. To allow our flame, our light to go out. But we can't allow that, not for our sake, not for the sake of others who rely on us to be light in the dark. Not for the sake of Christ.

We need to tend our flame, and ensure that our light can continue shining. That we are ready at a moment's notice to welcome those who need God's hope the most.

And through Christ, that is possible. God will give us the fuel we need. The interest, and passion, and energy that we need, in order to do the things that God is calling us toward. Because as much as think of Jesus as the bridegroom, I don't think he IS the bridegroom in this story. Certainly no one would ever get locked out of Christ's banquet.

But even so, God wants us to ready, to stay awake, to keep our light burning. Because you never know when you might be called upon to show someone the way in. Amen.