Shine God's Light for Others

Montague Center First Congregational Church
September 26, 2026

Old Testament Reading: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
2nd Reading: James 2:14-26
Gospel: Matthew 25: 1-13

Good morning!

Will you pray with me?

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts prove acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Well I am happy to see that we have made it to November! We are past the Winter Olympics, and FIFA World Cup. We made it through the heat of the summer and the 250th anniversary of our great nation on Independence Day. 2026 has been a year of advancements with Astronauts circling the moon for the first time since 1972, and Sarah Mullally being installed as the first female archbishop of Canterbury. This year has also seen the unfortunate continuation of old wars and the start of new ones. We are through the election and done with tax season. And now, for the first time all year, we start to prepare ourselves for the holidays. First there is Thanksgiving. A time when we tally up our blessings and thank GOd and others for all the good that we have experienced over the last year while simultaneously trying not to give way to the temptation of gluttony. After that we move into Advent and we prepare our hearts and minds to be cultivated by setting our eyes on heavenly topics like Hope, Peace, Joy, and then Love! By then we are ready to celebrate Christmas. And after that we start to map out what we want our next trip around the sun to look like. That time between Christmas and New Years is full of hopes and dreams for the coming year. From now until we ring in 2027, we have a LOT of planning to do. Whether its shopping lists or the arranging of schedules there is a lot of preparation both physically and spiritually. That is why when I saw the suggested gospel reading for this morning, I had to chuckle… It can't be a coincidence that the organizers of the lectionary would choose to put a parable all about preparedness into the church calendar this close to

thanksgiving by chance! This mornings gospel reading is a gift and an opportunity to take a first step in preparing our hearts and our minds for the joy of the holidays:

Coming from the book of Matthew chapter 25 versus 1- 13

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids[a] took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.[b] 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." 7 Then all those bridesmaids[c] got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." 9 But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids[d] came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." 12 But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.[e]

Before we dive into this parable, I want to give a little background into first century Jewish weddings: First, not unlike our modern day interpretation, the institution of marriage started at the betrothal. After what we would call the engagement, the soon to be groom would leave his soon to be wife and return to his fathers house where we would construct an upper room. During that time in those cultures, multi generational dwelling units would have been under construction with upper rooms added before the wedding so that the bride and groom had a place to call home once they were legally wed. Sometimes this would take months and months and without modern day communication devices, it left the bride and the wedding party waiting in great anticipation for the return of the bridegroom. This is common imagery that Jesus is using. Earlier in the gospels he has already used the metaphor of a wedding party to describe his connection to the church and to believers. In John 14:2-3 He says: " **My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."**

I also want to point out that this parable is given to just the Disciples days away from Judas's betrayal and Jesus's arrest. This is not like the parable of the lost sheep or the mustard seed or

the prodigal son. Those stories Jesus shares with large groups and are meant for believers and non believers alike Our Gospel reading today is a story for the disciples and it foreshadows when Peter James and John fall asleep in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus asked them to keep watch while he prayed on the very night of his arrest.

This parable is one of caution and of expectation. And it is given to believers to you and to me to remind us to be prepared for the day when Jesus returns. Hebrews 9:28 tells us that ***"Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."***

So what does it look like to wait on the Lord in 2026? We might not need oil for our lamps in the modern era, but we still need to shine a light for others.

Step one: We must have a relationship with God. Theologian Dr. Lisa Harper points out that all 10 of the bridesmaids have a connection to the wedding party. Not only were all of them invited, but all 10 RSVPed. This indicates a rapport… weddings might be a lot different but one thing that has not changed over the past thousand years is who gets an invite. Strangers are not invited to serve as bridesmaids in today's weddings and they were not invited in the first century either. We can increase our relationship with God the same way we build bonds with each other. We invest time and energy into our relationship. I love that old saying that a Bible that is falling apart is probably owned by someone who isn't. Increase your time in the scriptures, spend more time in prayer and meditation. Read a book that deepens your faith and spiritual practice. Have conversations with other believers that help to deepen your knowledge and challenge your preconceived notions. If you move in the direction of God, God will move toward you. Psalm 148 tells us that "**The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth**".

Step Two: we can't fall asleep. At the pancake breakfast a few Saturdays ago I was sharing with some of you that I can fall asleep any time in any place. It is like my super power. I can relate to the 10 bridesmaids… all of whom fell asleep both the wise and the foolish. This is a reminder that God does not expect perfection… God understands our human limitations but we cannot be lulled into the danger of doing what we do because it has always been done that way. Ministry is a bold business and it takes some tenacity.

In our second reading this morning, Janet read to us from the Book of James… In some translations it reads: Faith without works is dead. The Bible is clear, we do not get to work our

way into heaven. Romans 3:23 reminds us: “**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**”. But that does not mean we just give up and lean into our arrogant ways and wash our hands of service. When we have a right relationship with God our lives are transformed and we will naturally find our gifts and talents being used for the betterment of others. I do not believe in coincidences! I think that the people of this community are braided together for a reason and when you show up with your particular perspective and set of skills it is for a reason and it most definitely fits into place, like a puzzle piece for the good of the greater community.

Step three: We stay busy: We take that transformed version of ourselves full of talent and tenacity and we use that to serve others. Our community needs us. And I am not just talking about donations and service projects - those are important and we should strive to bless our neighbors with that kind of service but I am also talking about offering a smile, a kind word, a patient down beat for someone who is struggling or a word of encouragement to someone who needs it. We are, after all, ambassadors for Christ and the people around us should believe that even when the Xerox machine jams at work, or when the server forgets to put in your order or bring your refill. People should not have to read your I Love Jesus bumper sticker and then explain away your hand gestures in heavy traffic. Approaching the world with kindness and grace is a great way to be actively working for the Kingdom of God.

Step Four: We hold the light and we shine it for others. One of the most common metaphors for God in the Bible is light.

1st John 1:5: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."

Psalm 27:1 – *"The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?"*

James 1:17 – Refers to God as the **"Father of lights"**, with whom *"there is no variation or shadow due to change.*

John 1:4 – Jesus declares, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

This light is inside all of us and it is our responsibility to share that light with those without it. At the sake of sounding like a broken record, I want to mention that this is the last time I will be with you for the remainder of 2026. We started the year together in January and I spoke about

resilience and keeping the faith. I would like to end our time together this year by encouraging you to take that faith, that light, and share it with those who need it most. The world is a hard, dark place but it is not without hope because it is not without us. The light that we carry is a hope that springs eternal and is renewed each day and it is the very thing that this world needs. It is what this world craves. And be ready because that law of nature, the one that says that what we need most is what we want least, is alive and well in this situation too. Hopelessness and pessimism are powerful forces that spread like wild fire. It is an epidemic, and for good reason, People have to hunt for it because it is not easily found. And when they are looking for it, sifting through the pros and cons of this world, I hope and pray that they find you. We believers are the antidote to loneliness, hopelessness, and darkness because we have the eternal light of Jesus.

I encourage you all to take a flashlight as you leave today, a symbol of the light that you have that can be shared and seen and felt by others. A physical demonstration of the power of a simple act. And as a metaphor a reminder. When the lights go down in your own life, when things seem uncertain and void of hope or a way forward, you can still have positive anticipation so long as you have the light of God inside you. For this I say, praise be to God and amen..

BENEDICTION:

O Christ, our dearest Savior, kindle our lamps, that they may evermore shine for you, that we may receive unquenchable light from your grace and abundance for us. I pray and ask that the light here in this room will enlighten our darkness, and lessen the darkness of the world. May the God of hope fill us all with joy and peace and believing through the power of the Holy Spirit. Both now and forevermore, Amen.

Joshua 24:1-3 & 14-25

24 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. 2 And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. 3 Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac;

14 'Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15 Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'

16 Then the people answered, 'Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; 17 for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; 18 and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.'

19 But Joshua said to the people, 'You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. 20 If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.' 21 And the people said to Joshua, 'No, we will serve the LORD!' 22 Then Joshua said to the people, 'You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.' And they said, 'We are witnesses.' 23 He said, 'Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.' 24 The people said to Joshua, 'The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.' 25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

James 2:14-26

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters,[a] if you say you have faith but do not have
works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and
one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not
supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works,
is dead.
18 But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith without
works, and I by my works will show you my faith. 19 You believe that God is one; you do
well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. 20 Do you want to be shown, you senseless
person, that faith without works is barren? 21 Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by
works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along
with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. 23 Thus the scripture
was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as
righteousness’, and he was called the friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified
by works and not by faith alone. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified
by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? 26
For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

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