

Proper 27 A  
Matthew 25:1-13  
November 12, 2023

“Keeping the Lights On”  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*‘Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” 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.” 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. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open to us.” But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.*

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If I’m very honest with you, there are a number of features of this little parable that really rub me the wrong way – that don’t seem very heavenly or godlike – and I can’t help but feel a bit annoyed that Jesus would muddy the waters with this little anecdote. It bothers me that the bridesmaids were expected to bring their own lamps and oil to the wedding; that the

groom didn't arrive until midnight and offers no explanation or apology; that the so-called "wise" bridesmaids were so darn stingy; that the banquet door was shut in the faces of ones who'd already waited so very long; and that the poor waiting bride doesn't even bear mentioning. Is anyone else annoyed or at least perplexed by this story?

Maybe it rubs me the wrong way because, as a metaphor for the realm of heaven, it's really nothing like the way I think faith communities, glimpses of heaven's realm, are meant to function. And that's because, I think, at heart I am a congregationalist.

Congregationalists believe that the church is the voluntary association of members together in autonomous faith community with the right to self-governance, the democratic election of church leadership, and the mutual sharing in the ministry of the congregation. (repeat)

Congregationalists first arrived in North America from Holland on the Mayflower in 1620, after fleeing persecution in England. Their guiding document, the Mayflower Compact, with its emphasis on self-government, democratic consensus, and voluntary covenantal relationship as the "Body Politick" formed the framework for both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to the behavior of the "wise" bridesmaids in Jesus' parable, I believe that had they been Congregationalists, the bridesmaids would have shared the oil to make sure all the lamps were lit when the tardy groom finally arrived. That's what's special about Congregationalists: we work together to keep the lights on.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Pruitt. "How the Mayflower Compact Laid the Foundation for American Democracy," History.com, September 28, 2023: <https://www.history.com/news/mayflower-compact-colonial-america-plymouth>.

Ours is a tradition in which the ultimate expression of Christian faith is the gathered church in every time and place. It's the people that make the church – all the people. We all have a part to play.

In his first letter to the churches in Corinth, the apostle Paul offers the metaphor of the human body for the church. He writes:

*“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ . . . there are many members, yet one body.”*

We all have a part to play and none is greater than, or less than, any other part – one body working together for the health and well-being of the whole.

Here at New England Church, it takes you and me, our boards and committees, our staff and our volunteers to make up the body and each of us has a role to play and a voice that matters. That's why we don't have a clearly defined creed – because it's together that we name and claim the meaning that our faith has for us today. That's why membership is voluntary and uncoerced. That's why membership is covenantal – everyone committed to doing their part. And that's why I believe that if the bridesmaids had been Congregationalists, there would have been oil to share and all the lamps burning brightly. As Congregationalists, we believe we can only function well as the church, when all of us do our different parts together. We work together to keep the lights on.

While there are a few life-long Congregationalists among us, most of us have found our way to this wonderful tradition by a more circuitous route. That's why, today after worship, we're hosting our first-ever Involvement Fest. Of course, we all appreciate the values of this vibrant community; its autonomous nature; its emphasis on personal experiences of faith; its appreciation for diversity and acceptance of difference; its democratic ideals and can-do spirit. But we may not know exactly how to plug in, to find our niche. That's what Involvement Fest is all about – finding your niche, your part in this whole big congregational body.

Unlike many other congregations, the ministries of New England Church do not happen without the active engagement of its members. We are not a top-down, staff-or-program-driven church. We are a church built on the passion, talent, skills, and dedication of its members. It's a grass roots kind of church where each of us has a part to play and and it really does take all of us together to make it work.

In a way, it's a daunting model for ministry because we have no choice but to rely on others to make it happen. It puts a lot of responsibility on church members to do their part. It requires a good deal of trust to believe that it's possible. In another way, though, it's incredibly freeing to be a smaller part of a greater whole – of belonging to something bigger than ourselves with a reach that's greater than our own and the promise of doing so much more together than we could ever do apart.

As a former Southern Baptist who went to a Presbyterian college and worshipped at a United Methodist church and attended a Lutheran seminary, I can tell you that there is nothing I'd rather be than a Congregationalist. And there's no church I'd rather be one with than New England Church. Together, we are *going* to keep the lights on, for one another, for our community, and for our world. Thanks be to God. Amen.