

## “Have Your Lamps Lit”

Luke 12:32-40

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To have one's lamp lit is to be poised to respond to God's call to discipleship. Luke's teaching for the church community is both simple and urgent: BE READY! What Luke knows is that the Spirit breaks into our consciousness at any old time of the day or week, summoning us into some dimension of service, some ministry of peace, some mission of compassion. The Spirit breaks in and calls us out of our comfort zone, out of our routine, to serve Christ in ways we might not have ever imagined. This is the way it is with the Spirit. We know that God moves in mysterious ways. Our work is to be poised to respond when the Spirit falls upon **our** shoulders. Thus, we need to keep our lamps lit.

The story of Esther in the Old Testament comes to mind. She and her Hebrew people were living in exile in Persia when Haman, the king's head servant, filled with anti-Semitic hatred, plotted to kill all the Jewish people in the land. He even managed to get the king to sign a death warrant. Esther, apparently, had kept her lamp lit. She sensed the nudging of the Spirit. She sprang into action. You can all read the details on her action in the Book of Esther. It's a must-read book of the Bible. The point is: the Spirit blew into her life like a mighty wind, caught her attention, saying, “Esther, for such a time as this, you are the one who must act to halt the spread of hatred.” She responded with courage to save her people from one man's racism. Esther's story is a story for our own time.

Perhaps you will find yourself in an Esther-moment, called to stand up for what is right and just and faithful. As Esther kept her lamp lit, so must we!

I have to tell you I was glued to my TV set earlier in the week, following the tragic stories in El Paso, Texas and in Dayton, Ohio. What caught my attention was what I would describe as an Esther moment: the action taken by Donna Sifford. A trained border officer, her lamp was lit. When the Spirit moved, she leaped into action saving Christopher Grant's life from the rampage of one consumed by hatred. Christopher had tried to distract the shooter by throwing bottles at him. But he was down and wounded and bleeding. Donna Sifford moved to his side, tended to his gunshot wound, called for an ambulance, and stayed with him until he was admitted to a bed in the ICU at the local hospital. Like Esther, she risked her own life for the sake of another.

I pray that no one here ever has to be in, or respond to, such a situation. But Donna Sifford stands out for me as one embodiment of the Gospel teaching to keep one's lamp lit. She and the man she helped are soul mates now. She is a white woman. He is an African American man. He kept calling her his guardian angel. They had been unacquainted neighbors. Now they are connected in a special bond. That scene in the ICU we witnessed on the TV screen resembles what Luke had in mind when he imagined the emerging church. It would be a community of disciples who keep their lamps lit, poised to respond when the Spirit moves, poised to respond whenever hate threatens the peace.

The teaching in Luke's Gospel is to keep one's lamp lit, to be attentive to the moving of the Spirit in our midst. This is true for us individually, but it is also true for us as a congregation.

How is it that the Spirit is moving among us? In what direction? Luke would want us to be paying attention to this very dynamic.

Toni Morrison, our country's beloved novelist once wrote, "The function of freedom is to free someone else." I think of Toni Morrison as a prophetic voice whose lamp was always lit. She was poised to discern who, in this world, wasn't yet free. The Spirit nudged her again and again to write about what it really means to be free and what it means to set someone else free. She understood that **fear** is what robs a person of their freedom. This is how she understood her discipleship; setting someone else free from fear.

It just so happens that this is how I understand my own discipleship, and how I understand the discipleship of a local church. When we keep our lamps lit, we notice who isn't free to be themselves, who isn't free to realize their human potential, who isn't free to love, who isn't free to forgive, who isn't free to cry, who isn't free. We notice; then, we act.

As most of you know, my discipleship takes me in the direction of education. **What I know is that education is key to overcoming the darkness of fear.** I am thrilled that we have a vibrant pre-school. I am thrilled that we have a team of adults working to re-imagine religious education with our children and youth. I throw myself into Confirmation education and into middle school mission endeavors. I invite us to support young Malawians to achieve their educational goals. I write tons of letters of recommendation for college admissions.

For me, education takes us far beyond the classroom to the soup kitchens of inner cities, to an orphanage where children are hungry for love, to Habitat for Humanity sites where hopeful families contribute sweat equity, to conversations about affordable housing and the value of racial diversity. For me, keeping my lamp lit means being open to the Spirit's leading toward educational opportunities.

I am thrilled that South Church is a partner with the ABC House in Glastonbury and with the Freedom School on Vine Street in Hartford.

You see, once upon a time, the Spirit nudged me to be a teacher, a teacher of English in an African school. I went there to be a teacher, but I was the one who learned. I learned to trust the moving of the Spirit. I learned to set aside my fear of failure. I learned to let go of certain prejudices. I learned what it means to be free, free to simply be myself. I pray that my lamp stays lit as long as I have breath.

Being advocates for education in all its forms is what keeps us living in the greatest of hope. Amen.