

Heaven's Secrets: Watchfulness

Let me tell you a story that will illustrate the sad condition of my interior life. I probably should not you know admit these things in public because one of the elders is probably going to ask me if I would like a medical leave to get some help with my sad condition, but in order to make this sermon work I need to tell you this story.

So, you know that I like gasoline discounts programs. Well, last week I earned a \$0.15 per gallon discount. My car holds 18 gallons so with a 15 cent discount that's \$2.70! We're talking real money, right? Now imagine that I can do that say 10 times a year, I am saving \$27.00 a year. Of course, for this math to work I drive my car until it needs all 18 gallons of gas. On the day where my low fuel light turns on I need to drive a good long time before I can get gasoline. The secret is to never have my wife in the car with me I am trying to do this, even though I am calculating hard to make money for our family. As soon as she sees that low fuel light go on, say we're on the Expressway in Chicago, she insists that we stop at the next gas station, even though it might not be one where I get credit toward my next discount. \$2.70...gone!

There is one time of course when I know that I can't risk my strategy, even if Jill isn't in the car. When I really need to get someplace and running out of gasoline would make me inexcusably late, so late that by the time I got there you would be too embarrassed to go in or perhaps the doors would be closed. You can imagine for example driving to a wedding banquet in which I am to offer the prayer for the couple before the meal. Well if I play this game on that day and I show up late the father of the bride will probably be standing at the door saying we don't even know you. I already said the prayer. Thank you very much, *former* pastor.

So, I watch that low fuel light carefully if I know there are bad consequences for being late. That was the mistake of these bridesmaids who didn't have a spare oil tank on them for their lamps. You see, in the custom of the day, the bridesmaids would be in the street to welcome the groom on his way to the bride's home for the banquet. Their job was to escort the groom's party through the streets holding up their lamps so that they wouldn't look like vagabonds in the middle of the night and would instead be part of the great celebration of love between these newlyweds. Sometimes, however, the groom's arrival was late, much later than anticipated. That meant the bridesmaids ran the risk of running out of fuel for their lamps and then they would need to go get

more fuel from some vendor in town. Those who wanted to make sure they were ready for the groom so that they wouldn't miss the party, they brought along a spare container of oil. They were prepared. Those who were not prepared, they miscalculated how long it would be so they were not ready for the bridegroom to arrive. And what happens? The groom arrives while they are at the fuel station so they miss the banquet. They stopped watching for the groom's arrival because they weren't ready for the long wait, even though they knew it could be a long night of waiting.

The five bridesmaids who were not ready with the spare gas tank full, they went to those who were ready who had prepared and ask for them to share their extra supply. They would not, and let me suggest you why they would not and why this is not a bad thing. I mean, yes, we are supposed to share within the kingdom of heaven. The problem is that there are some things you cannot share. You can't share something that is not shareable. That is what Jesus is talking about as oil in the lamp, things like love and service and truth and living a righteous life. All of these characteristics we have been talking about, traits that Jesus Christ is looking for in those who people who want to be citizens in the kingdom of heaven. These characteristics are not shareable. If you never develop them in your life, or if you stop developing them, it's not like once you hear the

party of is about to begin that you can go to somebody else and say, 'Hey, can I get some of your generosity, can you repent for me, will you be humble for me?' Your neighbor's full tank of love, generosity, humility, these are unique to that person. Jesus is not teaching against sharing; he's teaching us that some things just cannot be shared. We need to fill up our own spare tanks of fuel.

Jesus is also teaching about the necessity of living in watchful expectation of his arrival. If you live your life in a way which says 'I don't believe this bridegroom is ever gonna show up', then you'll never be ready. It's too easy to back off from all of those 'churchy things', those religious things they used to have meaning for you, but you let the tank run to empty and you don't worry about it because you have stopped watching for the king, the groom's arrival.

But if I told you that the bridegroom is on the way and you should be ready because he's around the corner you would get ready right. But that isn't how it works. Jesus wants you to live a life of faithful watching and waiting, prepared for it to be a long wait, anticipating his arrival to open the doors to the banquet room. And since we do not know when that day is, we need to live each day as if today is the day. We should live our lives today not running the risk that we're going to run out of fuel, always making sure we have enough fuel in the tank to

get us to the banquet on time. That means that you keep sufficient levels of love and generosity and humility in your life. It means you continue to worship God and gather together with God's people, a weekly fill-up of your oil supply, so that you will have your light ready to join the procession to the great banquet.

Scott Hoezee relates a story which a well-known preacher, William Willimon, tells. When Willimon was a young pastor in rural Georgia, a dear uncle of one of his congregation's members died suddenly, and though this uncle was not a member of Willimon's church, he and his wife decided to attend the funeral. So Willimon and his wife drove to a back-woods, off-brand Baptist church for the funeral one sunny afternoon.

It was, Willimon said, unlike anything he had ever seen. They wheeled the casket in and soon thereafter the pastor began to preach. With great fire and flaying his arms all over the place, this preacher thundered, "It's too late for Joe! He might have wanted to do this or that in his life, but it's too late for him now! He's dead. It's all over. He might have wanted to straighten out his life, but he can't now. It's finished!"

As Willimon sat there, he thought to himself, "Well, this is certainly a great comfort for this grieving family!" The minister continued: "But it ain't too late for

you! People drop dead every day, so why wait?! Too late for Joe but not for you! Make your life count, wake up and come to Jesus now!”

“Well,” Willimon concluded, “it was the worst thing I ever heard. ‘Can you imagine a preacher doing that to a bereft family?’” he asked his wife in the car on the way home. “I’ve never heard anything so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate! I would never preach a sermon like that.” His wife agreed: it was tacky, calloused, manipulative.

“And of course,” his wife added, “the worst part is that everything he said was true.”

I wouldn’t preach a sermon like that either, but, of course, it is true. You do need to ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord; you do need to accept God’s love.

I wouldn’t preach a sermon like that either, but, of course, it is true. You do need to pay heed to the low fuel light when it starts flashing. Don’t let your tank run empty because the king is coming, friends; the king is coming to announce the Great Banquet Table is set. Those who live their lives watchfully waiting, they will be ready to accompany the King into through the door. Those who do not watch, those who live their faith lives running on empty, it isn’t worth the risk, really is it?

I wouldn't preach a sermon like that either, but I have to ask you, dear friends, since you are on your way to a dinner with Jesus, maybe this sermon is your low fuel warning light. You really don't want to ignore the warning and risk showing up late, only to find the door is closed, do you?

This will be 'hell', to be outside in the cold and dark while you know there is a party inside which you missed because you chose not to heed the warning to watch.

Live your life as if you know the king approaches, but be prepared for waiting through the night.

This means that we live our lives caring for the environment so that when the king arrives his world is beautiful. It means caring for the poor and homeless so that when Jesus tours Sheboygan he will see that we took seriously the call to love our neighbors as ourselves. It means practicing love, hospitality, generosity, humility.

Live watching for that low fuel light. Don't risk running out of gas on your way to Great Banquet.

It's not worth the \$2.70.