Burn your oil well
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and Matthew 25:1-13

There are many things that bind us together as human beings. Little experiences that we all share. Do you ever look at your watch. And then you don't know what time it is. So you look again. And you still don't know the time. Do you ever find yourself standing in one of your rooms at home, and you cannot remember why you want in there? There are many common experiences we all share.

One human experience I really enjoy is listening to a telephone conversation that someone else is having. And I like trying to guess what the person on the other end of the call is saying. It's fun to guess what the whole conversation is, based on only hearing half of the conversation. And actually, it's good practice for reading parts of the Bible. Particularly, the epistles of St Paul.

Our reading from 1 Thessalonians this morning is a good example. St Paul started a church in Thessalonica. Later, St Paul moved on to another city to start another church. But the congregation in Thessalonica had some issues after St Paul had left. So they reached out to St Paul for advice. And that advice was given in the form of the letter we now call 1 Thessalonians. So we get to hear St Paul's response to the congregation. But we do not get to hear what issue the congregation was facing. We have to guess what problem the congregation had. It's like listening to half of a phone conversation. Fortunately, in the case of 1 Thessalonians, it's not hard to figure out the other half of the conversation.

It was very common in the early Christian community that many people expected Jesus to return soon. Soon as in we do not need left-overs tomorrow. Soon soon. In some Christian communities, Jesus was expected to return before anyone in the community died. But as far as we can tell, Jesus has yet to return in the way that the early Christian community expected. The church in Thessalonica had members who were starting to die - and Christ had not yet returned. That was the issue that caused them to reach out to St

Paul.

And St Paul's response was - those who die first will be the lucky ones. As we read, "the dead in Christ will rise first". The people who have died will go to the front of the line.

"For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever." This text describes what is called the "Parousia". Also known as the second coming of Christ. The Parousia is a belief held by two religious groups, actually. It is part of both Christian and Islamic beliefs that Christ will return to the earth someday.

And on that subject, if we read from St. Paul's epistles in the order that scholars think they were written, an interesting pattern emerges.

1 Thessalonians was the first book in the New Testament to be written down, so we can start right there. As we just read, the expectation is for a physical "life boat" rescue. The faithful will be physically taken from the Earth. And this will happen at the last trumpet, meaning a specific time in the future. This idea is consistent with Jewish apocalypticism in Jesus's day. With the twist that Jesus will be the saviour.

If we fast-forward a bit we get to the book 1 Corinthians. From 1 Corinthians 15, "We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." Here, St Paul still describes a future event that is indicated by a trumpet. Still a life boat rescue. But the rescue is now spiritual, not physical.

If we fast-forward to Galatians, in chapter 2 we get, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." This describes salvation as perhaps not an event in the future at all. No last trumpet. Salvation is now about Christ living in me. Today. And salvation is personal, not collective.

And finally, fast-forward to Romans. From Chapter 6, "We know that our old self

was crucified with Christ so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin" Salvation is now very much a personal present day experience. And salvation now has to do with freedom from sin, not escape from the earth before a coming wrath.

During St Paul's own ministry, his understanding of the meaning of "salvation" changed. It went from a physical collective life boat rescue to an understanding that Christ lives within us as individuals. That salvation is now. Or - as we say each week when we extinguish the Christ Candle - that Christ is present in us, with us, and through us.

Our story from Matthew also describes the Parousia, and makes it clear that some people will be chosen, and others will not. There is no doubt that the author of Matthew intended the passage to be heard in that way. But I want to take a different reading of Matthew right now. Because salvation is now.

[image: lamp]

Here is how we usually tell this story. 10 women prepare lamps for a celebration. The celebration gets delayed because the bridegroom is late. When the bridegroom finally arrives, the lamps are all running out of oil. 5 of the women brought extra oil, and 5 did not. The ones with oil refilled their lamps. The ones without oil run off to get more oil. And while they are gone, the 5 women who had brought extra oil go into the banquet. When the other 5 return with more oil, they are too late and are not admitted into the banquet.

But there is another way to look at it.

Because the truth is that all 10 women brought enough oil. The problem is that much of the oil was wasted because the lamps were burning when there was no need for them to be burning. The lamps were burning oil even when the bridegroom was nowhere near. If the women had all waited, and lit their lamps when the bridegroom was approaching, they would all have had enough oil.

They all had enough oil. But much of the oil was wasted.

Does that remind you of anything?

[The $86,400 question]

I'm reminded of "The $86,400 question". One version goes like this.

Imagine that you have $86,400 dollars. And for some reason you keep that money under your mattress. Now imagine that someone steals $90 from you. How would you respond? Would you say that you don't like it when people steal from you so you throw the rest of the money away yourself? Because if you had no money, nobody would steal from you ever again. Or would you try to protect the money that you have left? Because you still have $86,310. I think most of us would try to protect the money we have left. And yet, amazingly, we often do actually throw all - or at least a lot - of our money away ourselves in situations like this.

Now - you know that I'm not talking about money. The numbers 90 and 86,400 were not chosen at random. 86,400 is the number of seconds in one day. And sometimes, during our day, someone does something that really annoys us. We get triggered. We become angry. And we hold that anger for perhaps the rest of the day. But science has demonstrated that when people make us angry, that phase of anger can only last for about 90 seconds. If we are still angry after 90 seconds, it is because we are keeping the anger going ourselves.

People can and do trigger us. And that can cause us to lose 90 seconds out of our day. And that is not our fault. But if we allow are ourselves to be upset longer than that, then we are throwing those seconds away ourselves. We all agreed that we would not throw away vast amounts of money. But part of human nature is that we often throw away vast numbers of seconds. We hold anger. We complain. We derail our own intentions for having a wonderful day.

We all have the same number of seconds in a day. The issue is - how do we choose to spent those seconds. Like in the lamp story. We all have enough oil. Where and when do you choose to burn your oil?

[image: 1/2 full versus 1/2 empty]

This is also related to a question we have about life. Is this glass half-full? Or is the glass half-empty?

I'm sure you've all heard this question before. And a common answer is that people who are optimistic will say that the glass is half-full and people who are

pessimistic say that the glass is half-empty. Right?

Well, I have a different answer. 2 answers actually.

[go to the communion table and bring out a glass of water]

One answer: Why are we fixating on the glass at all? Surely what we care about is the water. Why are we so triggered by the glass? This water is already a full glass of water. Let me demonstrate.

[pour the half-glass of water into a smaller glass]

Are you happier now? Are you really happier now that the glass is full? It's the same water.

So one answer is : focus on the water itself and forget about how the glass feels about itself.

[pour the water back into the larger glass]

The other answer: is that asking whether or not the glass is half-empty or half-full misses the point. Entirely. What the glass is is … refillable. And we all have the power to fill the glass up. Happiness is not something that just happens. We have to make it happen. We can fill the glass. Instead of just complaining how the glass is only half-full, we can fill the glass ourselves.

And that observation leads into what Bill and I learned last weekend at the Shining Waters Regional Council Annual General Meeting. Because the entire event was really about encouraging us to stop complaining and just fill the glass.

[image: SWRC resource book - being transformed by the renewing of our minds]

The theme of our 2 day workshop and annual meeting was, "Being Transformed by the Renewing of our minds". The 2 days consisted of a business meeting to discuss and vote on important issues in the Region. Also, a three-part presentation with small-group discussion. Also, stimulating worship. Also, general conversation among participants over breaks and meals. I always enjoy those meetings where I get to meet new friends and catch up with old ones. The casual conversations are - for me - as important as the other parts of the meeting.

There were something like 100 people present in the venue. And many others participated online.

The main speaker spoke about transforming our minds. But there were 3 parts to that.

[image: get rid of “stinking thinking"]

Part 1 was about our minds and our thoughts. This included identifying thought patterns that come from negative thinking. The speaker delighted in calling these thoughts “stinking thinking”. By which he meant thoughts about scarcity, that we are not enough, that we do not have enough. The speaker spoke about turning thoughts about fear into thoughts about joy and gratitude. And recognizing that honest self-evaluation is a first step.

That included a “program audit” for congregations. Instead of doing things just because we’ve done them for years …. To instead put our energy into activities that bring us joy. Do things that make us feel good. If an old idea still works, that’s fine. But we should not feel like failures because we no longer have energy for programs that no longer make sense in our time and place.

Part 2 was about our emotions and feelings. In discussion, this leaned heavily into the need to name our emotions. And to realize there there are no good and bad emotions. We have pleasant and unpleasant emotions. But emotions are not fundamentally good or bad. They just are.

[image: mood meter - simplified]

We were also introduced to the “mood meter”. A simple tool to help people identify their own emotional state. This is a very simple version. Up and down show energy. And left to right is uncomfortable to comfortable.

Part 3 was about how our thoughts and feelings need to lead to action. Thoughts alone are often not enough. The speaker shared one example. That all countries have laws prohibiting racist behaviours. The laws are well-written. But those laws do not stop racism. We need action too.

[image: thoughts feelings actions]

In group discussions, people share many ideas, particularly focused on where the church is going. There is now a broad recognition of numerical membership decline across the United Church. Some of what we learned is about how church bodies are

working towards that future. And much of what we learned is about how congregations are themselves adapting to create the future that they want.

As one institutional example. I went to seminary at Emmanuel College @ the University of Toronto. When I started, Emmanuel was a United Church seminary. But by the time I left, it had broadened it's scope beyond only supporting the United Church. They now provide programs and courses for Muslims, Buddhists, and others. When I graduated, I received a MDiv (Master of Divinity). Emmanuel still offers that, but they also offer a Master of Psychospiritual Studies. This year, Emmanuel graduated 5 MDivs and 52 Masters of Psychospiritual Studies.

I was much more interested in how congregations were changing. One congregation spoke who said that they had a minister that they loved. But recently, she was away on maternity leave. The congregation decided they did not want to go through the effort to get a replacement minister. So - partly because they knew this was only for one year - the congregation just stepped up and started doing what they had to do themselves. They started running their own worship. I'm know they had some help from the Region too, but they decided to maintain their own identity by doing it themselves rather than bringing in a temporary minister. Interesting!

Many other stories were about figuring out what people in the community really needed, and then providing that. In the past, we have had many stories like that where the story ended with starting a food bank or something like that. But this year was different. The "community needs" were more the needs of congregational members themselves. And the needs are for … to be blunt …. caring, presence, meeting for coffee, more informal conversation and connection. Simply being and building community. And that makes a lot of sense. Many people's biggest problem today is that they are lonely. I'd like to think that our churches can contribute to helping with that.

[image: lamp]

We all have enough oil. We just have to think about when and where we want to burn that oil. And together, we are enough. Burn your oil where it brings you joy. Burn your oil well.

Amen.