



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"Midnight for the Church?"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on October 29th, 2023, from Matthew 25:1-13*

August 6, 1965, was landmark day in American history. Following the long and arduous work of the civil rights movement, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, prohibiting racial discrimination in elections. A few months later, in 1966, Myers Park Baptist approved a landmark resolution of its own to fully welcome into our membership all races of people using the phrase, "open to all and closed to none," for the very first time. It was an extraordinary moment in the history of our church, Myers Park neighborhood, and the city of Charlotte. During the era of Jim Crow segregation, for the first 23 years of our history, our forebearers struggled to differentiate themselves from the exclusive theology of the American caste system. Yet when we look around at the beautiful diversity of our community today it's hard to believe there was ever a time when the church was not fully "open to all."

The struggle of our forebearers is not surprising when we understand the true history of our country. Isabel Wilkerson, who spoke at Queens this past Thursday night, claims our nation is like an old house built on a faulty foundation or a patient with a pre-existing condition. So, when the racial ideology of the American caste system rears its ugly head, we should never be surprised. 23 years of struggle is not surprising. What is surprising is that our forebearers changed course. In 1966 they declared once and for all that we would be open to all. And it is impossible to overstate the significance of this or the courage and bravery that was required to make that declaration of that magnitude in a segregated Southern city and in a neighborhood with racially restrictive covenants and deeds. The power of their extraordinary decision to be fully open to all races set our church on a course of inclusivity that has profoundly shaped our identity and our mission in the world.

The resolution of 1966 was just the beginning. We established an inner-city ministry in Piedmont Courts to address racial disparities in housing. Our third Senior Minister, Carlyle Marney, and chair of Deacons, Ed Burnside, partnered with Black leaders to desegregate restaurants and business. Deacon Betty Jo Hamrick and the women of the church, responded to the bombing of 16th Street Baptist in Birmingham that killed four little girls, by holding meeting at the church where they advocated for desegregation and organized interracial groups that met in member's homes. In 1971, our fourth Senior Minister, Gene Owens was one of only two clergy in the city to voice his support for forced bussing for school integration and lend a hand to lawyers working to overcome racial disparities in education.



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Since the 70s, we continued to draw the circle wider and expand our inclusivity as a people on a journey of faith by welcoming and embracing the first women Deacons and clergy; welcoming and embracing a Jewish congregation to worship in what is now "Shalom Hall;" welcoming and embracing people of all religious, denominational, and faith backgrounds including atheists and agnostics. From the invitation of Rev. Carter Heyward to the tireless work of the late Fran Kerr (among others), we welcomed and embraced people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. We also welcomed and embraced people of all citizenship, nationalities including undocumented immigrants. Finally, we returned to the unfinished business of racial justice laid out by our forebearers in 1966 and welcomed and embraced the first people of color as deacons and ministers in the history of our church.

For 80 years we have been a people possessed by the dream of a church that is an ever—widening circle of inclusion—never static or stagnant, but a living and dynamic reality; constantly expanding to embrace more and more people—especially those who have been traditionally excluded by American religion. Today, the question that this generation of members faces is: What's next for our church? Where is the Spirit calling us to go now? Who is the Spirit calling us to be today; at this particular moment; for such a time as this? Last week, Rev. Dr. K. Monet reminded us that even though we're living in the wilderness of a network age, God calls us to go into the wilderness to build a highway of love, justice, peace, and beloved community for all people—and we've already started leveling the ground, making rough places plain.

We do live in a wilderness age; a time when there are wars and rumors of wars; an age of church scandal and decline, political division, mass shootings every day, and white Christian nationalism. Some commentators believe the doomsday clock is at 11:59 and it's about to be midnight for America and the church. I was planning to talk with you today about the subject, "Midnight for the Church?" My sermon title is supposed to have a question mark at the end. What a difference punctuation can make!

Is it midnight for the church in America? What do you think? Just this week I heard a rumor that there are some folks who believe it's midnight for Myers Park Baptist Church. That was certainly news to me! But as I reflected on the parable of the bridesmaids and stewardship, I've come to think we're asking the wrong question. The question is not, "Is it midnight for the church?" or even "What time is it for the church?" The real question is, "When did the church become afraid of the dark?" "When did we become a people who are afraid of a little midnight?"



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Are we afraid of the dark—of midnight—of the unknown? Halloween is the perfect time for us to face our fears of the dark and even admit we're afraid of the dark, it is important to know that God is not. As the Biblical witness reveals powerful and transformative events take place at midnight. I'm not talking about ware-wolves shape shifting in the light of the moon. God liberated people from the empire of Egypt at midnight, the kinsman redeemer Boaz discovered Ruth lying by his feet at midnight, the Psalmist states they rose to sing praise for God's justice and righteousness at midnight, the Spirit of God broke Paul and Silas out of jail while they were singing hymns at midnight. We don't need to be afraid of midnight. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, Jesus in the tomb, [or disciples huddled in an upper room], new life [always] starts in the dark."

Midnight is the time when things happen. We need the dark. Perhaps the church must travel through midnight to become a new creation. The only reason be afraid of the dark, or midnight, or the unknown is if we are not prepared, or if we don't have the resources we need to thrive in the midnight hour. The parable of the bridesmaids is a story about the kind of preparation, attentiveness, watchfulness, and vigilance we need to be a follower of Jesus. But there is also a hidden message in the common everyday element that some of the bridesmaids carried with them—the oil. Oil is a powerful symbol in the Bible, extremely important in Middle Eastern culture, that was commonly used in food, medicine, and religious rituals. But many do not know that in the Greek language, the word for "oil" is almost the same as the word "mercy." Just a few letters off. In fact, some scholars believe olive trees and olive oil were named after mercy because the trees give oil so abundantly. Olive groves in Palestine were the most glorious and abundant sources of provision for people's daily lives, which came symbolize God's enduring mercy and generosity.

In our culture today the word mercy has become a rather nebulous word. At best we use mercy as a synonym for grace or forgiveness. But in Second Temple Judaism, at the time of Jesus, the word "mercy" had come to be defined as giving alms to the poor, what we might call charity or generosity. So, when Jesus told the parable of the bridesmaids, his audience would have known he wasn't just talking about preparation or vigilance. He was teaching that the difference between the wise bridesmaids and the foolish bridesmaids is that the wise bridesmaids carried the oil of mercy and generosity with them, but the foolish bridesmaids did not and ran out of gas. Their generosity was all dried up.



Jesus was saying that we need generosity to light our way on this journey through the dark, during the midnight hour, into the unknown. Not only that, but according to Jesus, we need generosity to make our way from midnight hour to the wedding banquet. Our church, our community is meant to be like a party, a bash, a feast, a festival, a banquet of love and joy filled with food and drink, singing and dancing—but that's only possible with the oil of generosity.

When the foolish bridesmaids realized they had no oil, they ran off to the dealers to try buy some for themselves, but they missed the party. They found out the hard way that true generosity, like true relationships, cannot be bought or sold. We live in the most transactional era of human history. Our economic system has formed each of us into buyers and sellers, consumers, and providers, which has the tendency to make every human encounter and relationship in our society into a transaction—including our faith, our relationship with God, and the church.

Anthropologists have shown that across human cultures, whenever a relationship becomes purely transactional or strictly contingent, giving stops and generosity ceases. Ethnographers studying diverse cultures have noted that attempts to [strictly] balance exchanges are tantamount to ending relationships. This isn't just true for people. Zoologists explain that nonhuman primates operate in a more contingent manner with partners they're less bonded to. Following transactional norms is the sign of a strictly contingent relationship, which leads to the absence of a sharing or helping. Basically, scholars and scientists have shown us that transactional behavior kills human relationships because it kills our generosity.

Sadly, the most popular form of Christianity in the world today is transactional; the prosperity gospel—a faith perfectly designed for our economic system which insists that the more faith we have the more God will bless us with health and wealth. It's a quid pro quo connection with the divine. We give God this and God gives us that. But of course, this transactional religion creates a transactional relationship with God, and often creates transactional relationships with other people as well. Most progressive Christians have long evolved beyond the shallow faith of prosperity religion and its transactional relationship with God. But what about our relationship with the church? Has our relationship with church evolved beyond transaction?



It is quite common for people to think of the church as a provider of goods and services like other businesses and organizations. Our transactional system is so pervasive that our minds easily slip into believing that the church provides the goods and services of community, music, worship, preaching, education, spiritual formation, programming for children, youth, and adults, pastoral care, and opportunities for outreach to those in need. Therefore, I give the church a donation as payment for those goods and services. But there are a host of problems with this transactional way of thinking. For starters, the church is not a mall, a grocery store, Amazon.com, or Netflix. Churches don't have shoppers, consumers, or subscribers. We have followers, disciples, members. The church isn't in the business of providing goods and services, but transforming our lives, starting with our relationships with everything in existence from God and our neighbors to ourselves and the world.

How do you put a price tag on community? How do you put a price tag on worship or pastoral care? How do you put a price tag on a relationship with God? How do you put a price tag on transformation? It's not possible, which is why the Bible suggests a percentage of your income, because there is no way to calculate or repay the impact God or church can have on our lives. Our relationship with church was never meant to be transactional, but transformational.

The real trouble of having a transactional relationship with our community of faith is what happens when it disappoints you. What happens when the music isn't good, or the sermon steps on our toes, or the programming isn't what we want? What happens when the leaders decide to go in a direction we're not comfortable with? Do we decrease our giving? Do we stop giving altogether? Do we use our giving to try and get our way? Do we blackmail the church? In twenty years as a pastor, I can testify to one thing with certainty—when people have a transactional relationship to church, it almost always leads to some form of extortion. People who believe the church exists to provide for their personal preferences tend to use their money as a form of power. But this lack of giving is always a symptom of a transactional relationship.



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A couple of weeks ago, I was walking through the mall with my daughter, and she saw a pair of \$300 dollar Nike Air Jordans she wanted. She asked me to buy them for her and I said “no.” Not only did I not have \$300 to spend on sneakers at the time. I didn’t want her to think that I’m going to give her whatever she wants when she wants it. But when I said no, she tried a different strategy. She cracked a smile and said, “Dad, if you really loved me, you’d buy me those sneakers.” Ouch! She went right for the jugular. It was ridiculous, but for a second the thought crossed my mind, “Will she think I don’t love her if I don’t buy the sneakers?” She almost had me, but I said, “You know that’s not true.” I didn’t buy those sneakers. And guess what, my daughter still loves me! When the people we love disappoint us or are unable to fulfill our needs, we don’t we stop loving them! We don’t stop feeding them! We don’t stop caring for them! If we did there would be no families or friendships that last longer than a week!

We do not give to our children, spouses, families, or friends, because of what we get in return. We give because we love them, and the same should be true for church, a community of people working together for mutual transformation and the transformation of the world. We don’t give simply because the church is doing what we want. We give because we love the church—its people. The difference of the wise bridesmaids who enjoyed the wedding banquet is that they had enough oil, enough mercy, enough love, and enough generosity to make it through the night, to light their way in the dark, to find a path through the unknown, and to discover the joy of celebration. This stewardship season we’re inviting everyone to level up and go further on the journey of generosity; to move toward transformational instead of transactional giving; to move toward giving “from” instead of “for;” to move toward giving from the love we have instead of for the love we will receive.

My wife has a phrase she likes to use in her work with non-profit boards all over the country. She says, “There’s nothing wrong with having an agenda. The only wrong agenda is a hidden agenda.” Friends, I have an agenda that has never been hidden. It’s been as clear as a cloudless sky at midnight. It’s become rather obvious to anyone who’s heard me. I have a vision for this church, and I am not ashamed to share it with you this morning. My vision is for us to become the first truly inter-racial church in the history of Myers Park. I can see a community of full integration in what was once a place of segregation. It is an exciting vision, a thrilling vision, a biblical vision, a gospel vision, a Jesus vision, a Pentecost vision. But it is not my vision alone. It’s an old vision that goes back 57 years. It is our vision. It’s the vision of 1966 that our forebearers had when they resolved this church would be “open to all and closed to none.” And I want every single one of you to be a part of making this vision a reality.



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I've been told that building an inter-racial church in Myers Park is not a "sustainable financial strategy." I've been told it's not possible for there to be an inter-racial church in Myers Park. To that I say, "Oh, ye of little faith. Wait and see what God can do." Some people think we're afraid of the dark. They think we're ill prepared for midnight. They think we don't have the resources we need. They think we will shrink in the face of the unknown. But they don't understand how much oil we have, do they? They don't understand how long we can burn or how brightly we can shine. They don't understand how much spirit we have, how much love we have, how much faith we have, how much mercy we have, how much generosity we have. There's plenty of oil in our flasks! We have enough oil to be the light in the darkness and burn like a fire all night long. And you can't buy this kind of oil at the store. You can't find it on Amazon or at Harris Teeter. It comes from the Creator of the universe, from a place inside each of us so deep the world cannot touch it or conceive.

I believe every one of us in this place today has enough of the oil of generosity inside us to move from giving *for* to giving *from*, to move from transactional to transformational giving, and to make our forebearers vision of an inter-racial church a reality. People said Israel would never make it through the wilderness, they said a man could never rise from the grave, they said the church would never survive the Roman Empire, they said slavery would never end, they said segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever, and they said there will never be an inter-racial church in Myers Park, but God said, "Wait and see!"

As people who follow the God of Israel and Jesus, we know, that sorrow may last for a night, but joy comes in the morning. It might be midnight now, but a new dawn is coming. It might be dark now, but a new day is coming. It might be difficult to see right now, but a new light is coming. It might be nighttime now, but now morning is on the horizon. The bridegroom is coming, the wedding is coming, the banquet is coming, the party is coming, joy is coming, celebration is coming, love is coming, life is coming, an inter-racial community of faith is coming. All we have to do to make that vision of our forebearers a reality today is to give freely, to give lovingly, to give sacrificially, and to give transformationally from the oil of generosity. Wait and see what God will do.