

Nov. 7, 2020 Pentecost 23
Being Refreshed
Matthew 25:1-13

All month we are looking at our "Being"—who we are and who we are becoming as we spend time with Jesus. Our being is separate from our doing. Our doing flows from our being.

Last week we looked at Being Resurrected. This week, using our Gospel reading as our text, we are looking at Being Refreshed. But in this day and age, we can't look at being refreshed without looking at what is commonly called "burnout." There is a lot of burnout going on in our society. 2020 has taken its toll. To all of us in or on the edge of burnout, Jesus offers true refreshment.

In my teenage years, burnout meant something completely different. It meant stopping your car and then flooring the gas pedal so that your tires spin, squealed and smoked and left a black patch on the street. The street in front of my mom's house was covered in burn out patches (all left by my brother and his friends, of course).

In recent decades, "burnout" has become a popular word to describe a particular human problem. Burnout is commonly understood as what happens when someone becomes exhausted by a major activity in life. Many symptoms can be associated with burnout; that the word has become popular indicates that the problem may be common.

I am told that in 2020 more people are experiencing burnout than ever before. I know from my circles that more pastors are leaving the ministry because of burnout than ever before. COVID-19, quarantines and shelter in place orders, injustice and a really nasty year politically have taken their toll. Burnout is common to all of us.

Today's gospel story about the foolish and prudent bridesmaids can be heard as a story about burnout. Some of the bridesmaids suffer burnout. They seem to lose their chance at life. Why does this happen to them and not to the others?

All ten bridesmaids are waiting for the bridegroom to appear. The custom is for them to escort him into the place where the wedding will occur. It is also the custom for him to delay his arrival as a practical joke!

And so, these girls, dressed in their bridesmaid gowns, wait, and they wait, and they wait. The sky grows dark, the sun sets, the evening hours pass. Finally, it's midnight, and all of them are asleep.

A shout of warning awakens them! Quickly, they attend to their lamps. Several of them have adequate fuel, and soon their lamps are glowing in the darkness. Others do not. They ask to borrow some, but there is none to spare. They go out to buy fuel—at a 24-hour convenience store, no doubt. While they are gone, the bridegroom finally arrives and is escorted inside by the remaining bridesmaids. The girls who went in search of fuel return too late. They are all dressed up, without any place to go. They are left outside in the dark, with the door shut. The story ends like a bad dream.

To experience burnout is to lose your chance. It is to be left outside. When burnout happens, we find it hard to light our lamps. The darkness remains dark. Because we are somewhere else when the action happens, we cannot recognize the bridegroom, rejoice at his arrival, and walk along the path with him. We never see his face.

Like the bridesmaids in the story, each of us needs a supply of fuel. How can we get our supply? We cannot borrow from someone else. No one can live our life for us. The fuel we use must be our own. Another way to say this is that each of us must have our own internal resources.

To use a term from my southern youth, we need a "filling station." For you young people, that is a gas station.

One filling station is worship. Through word and sacrament and community, through hymns and prayers and gestures, fuel for our lamps becomes available to us.

For this to happen, we must allow worship to touch us. On these occasions at least, our ego defenses must be down. We can permit ourselves a stillness, a receptivity, a sense of awe that may be very different from how we behave at other times. This attitude is necessary if we are to gain fuel, if our lamps are to glow in the darkness. Otherwise, we will have no fuel and no fire.

We need other filling stations throughout the week. This can include setting aside a daily period for prayer, for silence, for thoughtful reading of the Bible and other spiritual literature, for journaling, for activities that

nourish and refresh us. Our practices will vary depending on the sort of person we are. There is no single correct formula.

It can be helpful to have a room or a corner that we dedicate to our time with God. A cross can be a visual focus in this area. Prayer books and other resources can be kept there. By resorting to this space for solitary prayer or household prayer, we can gain daily fuel and continue to burn brightly from one Sunday to the next.

Something else that can be helpful is to have a written rule of life that details prayer practices and other habits intended to contribute to our transfiguration.

A good rule is free from unrealistic ambition, yet still challenges us. It is subject to occasional review and adaptation in response to changing circumstances. Advice on establishing a rule of life can be sought from a trusted spiritual guide, someone who knows about the fuel our lamps require.

If we are to avoid burnout, then the attitude we cultivate in public worship must permeate the rest of our life. Something of Sunday can soak through every day of the week. To avoid burnout, practice prayerfulness.

Doing this is not easy. Again and again, we fall short. But repeatedly, we are free to re-enter into prayerfulness. This present moment need not be lived as something that simply flees. Instead, we can experience it for what it truly is: time in which God is present – present to us, present with us, reaching toward us, calling us forward into life.

When we participate in the Sunday liturgy and dedicate further time to God throughout the week, we find ourselves open to life, open to flourishing through whatever our daily circumstances may be. Not only is God there with us in every moment, but more than that, God acts upon us through the unique circumstances of that moment. The Holy One is never done with us and never gives up on us.

One of our key words this year is “refresh.” Being refreshed is an antidote for burnout and a key to alertness.

Are you being refreshed? Jesus lived in a way open to everything God intended for him. His openness caused him to stop, to take time away to be refreshed.

Openness to whatever God intended for him also led Jesus to suffering throughout his life, especially during his last days that culminated in the cross. This same openness received divine endorsement when, just after his utterly real death and burial, he was raised up in a glorious refreshment that will prevail forever.

That we are human even as Jesus was human means we face comparable options, even now. Either we are refreshed, or we burn out. Our choices are welcoming God's gift of grace and life and power or becoming mortal ashes without hope.

Our refreshment depends on whether we open ourselves to God working in us through diverse circumstances, whether we look for God to meet us in the moment, whether we seek out God in public worship and personal prayer so that we may come to recognize God's presence with us in all things.

Our refreshment depends on whether we cultivate the habit of prayerfulness through the very real ups and downs of every day and every week. This requires the humility to begin anew over and over again.

This transfiguration depends on whether we worship together, and do so in a generous spirit, discerning through our worship and prayer the One who loves us perfectly and rules over us in love.

I have spoken to you in the name of the God who makes our refreshment possible: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.