This morning we begin a series of sermons from Matthew 25 called “A Celebration of Service.” As you know, service is an essential aspect of Christian discipleship and it is part of our congregational purpose as expressed in our purpose statement. According to our purpose statement, we are embraced by God’s grace and live for his glory, forming spiritual leaders who are growing in Christ, going in service, and showing the gospel – together!

Indeed, this congregation could not well exist without the volunteer efforts of many. This morning we distributed a beautiful flyer highlighting fourteen different volunteer ministries that support our chapel program. This is by no means an exhaustive list but it does represent many of the principal programs that make ministry happen here and around the Yard. Many of you are involved in these ministries and all of you benefit from the dedicated service of so many who worship here.

In Matthew 25:1-13, Jesus tells the tale of a Jewish wedding which teaches us a few important lessons about our service in his kingdom. As you know, a wedding depends on the voluntary efforts of many. Wedding customs change over time but some things remain the same. Volunteers are always needed. There are ring bearers and flower girls, swordsmen, groomsmen and bridesmaids. At least that’s the case today.

And in Jesus’ day, things were very much the same. Friends and family volunteered to make the wedding special. So Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.” (Mt. 25:1)

You see, in Jesus’ day the bridegroom went to the bride’s house to get her and then took her back to his own house to celebrate the marriage feast. So the bridesmaids were waiting along the way to light his way to the brides’ house. In essence, they were called to serve him. And what did that service look like? Well, they were called to welcome him, walk with him, shine for him and feast with him.

Now in this parable the bridegroom represents Jesus and the bridesmaids represent his Church. And like the bridesmaids of the parable, we are called to serve Jesus Christ. And how are we called to serve him? Like them, we are called to welcome him, walk with him, shine for him and feast with him.

Yes, all of us are called to welcome Jesus. Not everyone did in Jesus’ day. Not everyone does today. But if we welcome Jesus into our hearts then he will welcome us into God’s home. He will make us part of God’s family. As John 1:11-12 says, “He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name…” (KJV)
My friend, have you welcomed Jesus into your heart? That’s the first thing we’re called to do for Jesus. Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” (Rev. 3:20 ESV) You see, we’re called to throw open the doors of our heart and bid him a hearty welcome. That’s how the Christian life begins.

Yes, all of us are called to welcome Jesus. And we’re called to walk with Jesus, too. The bridesmaids were called to walk with the bridegroom along the pathway into town. And you and I are called to walk with Jesus along the many pathways of our lives. In other words, we’re called to follow him. We’re called to go where he wants us to go and do what he wants us to do. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must...follow me.” (Mt. 16:24 NIV) Likewise, 1 Peter 2:21 says Jesus left us an example that we should follow in his steps. And according to 1 John 2:6, “…whoever says, ‘I abide in him,’ ought to walk just as (Jesus) walked.”

Yes, we’re called to walk with Jesus. We’re called to go where he wants us to go and to do what he wants us to do. That’s the second service we’re called to offer Jesus. My friend, are you walking with him?

Yes, we’re called to welcome him and walk with him and shine for him as well. According to Matthew 25:1, each bridesmaid took a lamp and went to meet the bridegroom. You see, they were to light his way along the way, all the way to the bride’s house. That was their primary task; that was their principal duty.

And Jesus wants us to shine a little light in this dark world. In Matthew 5 he says, “You are the light of the world...let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven.” (Mt. 5:14, 16) And Paul says, “Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.” (Ph. 2:14-15)

You and I are called to shine like lamps in a dark and sinful world. The moral quality of our lives and the caring service we render should stand out in stark contrast to the wickedness and selfishness that so often darken our culture. My friend, does your life shine?

Those ten bridesmaids in Jesus’ story were called to welcome the bridegroom, to walk with the bridegroom, and to shine for the bridegroom, too. And if they did all of that then they would feast with the bridegroom, also. Matthew 25:10 says, “…those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.”

In this parable the wedding banquet symbolizes heaven – the final consummation of all things when evil is vanquished, salvation is finished, and God’s will is perfectly done. This banquet is described by John in Revelation 19. John says, “After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, ‘Hallelujah!
Salvation and glory and power to our God ...Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready...And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'” (Rev. 19:1, 6-7, 9)

Blessed, indeed, are all those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb of God and welcomed into heaven. Friends, if you welcome Jesus, and walk with Jesus, and shine for Jesus then you'll feast with Jesus forever. But not everyone will. And not all of these did. Some of these bridesmaids were excluded in the end. Why? They were excluded because they ran out of oil.

According to Jesus, all ten of them took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. But five of them were wise and five of them were foolish. Now the wise ones took extra oil for their lamps but the foolish ones did not. And when the bridegroom's coming was delayed, the lamps of the foolish went out and they had to find fresh oil; but by then it was entirely too late. They should have fetched fresh oil earlier while they had the time. So while they were off fetching fresh oil, the wise maids went with the bridegroom to enjoy the wedding feast and the door was shut behind them, never to open again.

So you see oil was essential for their service. They had to have oil to walk with and shine for the bridegroom. Without it, they were powerless to serve him and were excluded by him in the end. So what is this oil? In the Bible, anointing oil represents the presence, power, and ministry of the Holy Spirit. For example, in Luke 4:18 Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me.” And in Acts 10:38, Peter says, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.”

Friends, we need to be anointed by, or filled with, the Holy Spirit in order to walk with and shine for Jesus in this world. When we welcome Jesus into our heart, we receive the Holy Spirit at that time. But we need to find a fresh supply of oil every day. We need fuel for the fire. We need daily to be filled and refilled with the presence and power of the blessed Holy Ghost. How do we get oil? Where do we find it? How do we get a fresh infusion of the Spirit every day?

The answer is found in Ephesians 5. Ephesians 5 reads like a sermon or commentary on Matthew 25. In Matthew 25 there are wise and foolish bridesmaids. In Ephesians 5:15-17, Paul says, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”

In Matthew 25, the bridesmaids are called to shine for the bridegroom. In Ephesians 5:8-9, Paul says, “…once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as
children of the light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true."

In Matthew 25 the bridesmaids fall asleep and are roused when someone cries, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” (Mt. 25:6) In Ephesians 5:14, Paul says, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Finally, in Matthew 25 the wise bridesmaids had plenty of oil in their lamps; and when they ran low, they had extra oil on hand with which to fill them. Likewise, in Ephesians 5:18 Paul says, “…be filled with the Spirit…” But how? How are we to get a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit? Well Paul tells us. “(B)e filled with the Spirit,” he says, “as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Ep. 5:18-21)

Here, Paul tells us how to get a fresh supply of oil. He tells us how to be filled and refilled with the Holy Spirit. So what should you do? Friend, if you want to be filled and refilled with the Holy Spirit then immerse yourself in a Spirit-filled community. In other words, find a small group of fellow believers. Get with them on a regular basis. Worship with them, pray with them, study with them, fellowship with them, and hold one another accountable or as Paul puts it, be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. It’s in and through a Spirit-filled community that you are filled and refilled with the Spirit of God.

A few nights ago Chaplain Cash invited several of us to his house were we met with members of our Sunday School and some of our Midshipmen. We ate white chicken chili, nibbled on cheesy cornbread, and gorged ourselves on banana pudding. We talked over dinner about how things were going and then sang a few songs, said a few prayers, read a few verses, shared a few thoughts, and went away with a little more oil in our lamps.

A week or so ago, one of our neighbors decided she would lead a Bible study in her home so she sent an invitation to the spouses on Porter, Rodgers and Upshur roads. My wife received the invitation and has decided to attend. I bet she’ll find some extra oil there!

If you get our weekly chapel e-letter then you’ll notice that there are two home Bible studies that meet every other Sunday at 6:00 p.m. In addition, some of the men in our congregation meet for breakfast every week while others meet for lunch at various locations. On Tuesdays near noon the Midshipmen come here to choir practice and Chapel Chorale gathers at 6:00 p.m. to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. In all of these meetings, wherever they are, the members find fresh oil to keep their lamps burning brightly for another week.
My friend, you’ve been called to serve Jesus: to welcome him, walk with him, shine for him and feast with him forever. But you can’t do that if your lamp goes dry. So get oil! Find fuel. Feed the flame. “(B)e filled with the Spirit as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Ep. 5:18-21) In other words, get involved! Find a friend. Join a group. Start one if you must. Worship with them, pray with them, study with them, fellowship with them, and hold one another accountable to Christ. Get some oil and keep the fire burning. Amen.