

# A CHURCH FULL OF ACOLYTES

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Matthew 25:1-13

November 9, 2008

(Proper 27, Yr. A)

**In the tender compassion of our God  
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,  
To shine on those who dwell in darkness  
and the shadow of death,  
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.**

It's been almost fourteen years now since Mom and Dad's house burned to the ground. A drunk driver lost control of his car, ran off the road, and crashed right into their house --right into the furnace, in fact. And the car and the furnace exploded. And in just a matter of minutes everything went up in flames. Mom somehow managed to get Dad out of the house. But the driver was killed. And the house and everything in it was destroyed. One minute they were home, resting comfortably, and the next they were panic-stricken and helpless, watching their home go up in flames.

It was a terrible time for them -- to lose so much after so many years. But people were *there* for them. Family and friends and neighbors. The church in Wayne. Even some of Dad's former students and the other nurses and some of the doctors Mom worked with in Huntington. People were *there* for them. They sent cards and letters. They donated furniture and clothing. And every day someone would come with a meal, or desert, or they would come simply to visit and give them a little encouragement and support.

And we learned then what we had always *heard* -- that of all the *things*, of all the possessions lost in the flames, some of the most

precious are pictures and photographs. Because those pictures tell the story of your life and your family. They tell you who you are -- where you've come from and who you're part of. And after nearly fourteen years we *still* wish we could see them.

But the wonderful part of it all is that some of those old family albums have been "rebuilt." Some of those same pictures are there again. Because mom's sisters and brothers, her nieces and nephews copied the pictures *they* had of our family. And so did neighbors and friends and classmates and co-workers. And they put them together in a family album. And they presented it to them. And every now and then, a few more pictures will show up at their house. They'll come in an envelope with a card, or someone will bring them when they stop by to visit. And it's wonderful to see them again and remember the stories behind them.

We were there at Thanksgiving a few years ago, and while we were there I noticed a little booklet lying there on the coffee table. And it was a small photo album with maybe ten or twelve pictures in it. All of them black and white. Most of them I'd seen before. But there was one I'd forgotten. It was a picture of me when I was about ten years old, or maybe eleven. And I was standing in front of an evergreen (or ever-black-and-white) tree. And I was wearing a robe. An acolyte's robe. Which was my calling in life... and still *is*, I think. It still is...

I did it at church every Sunday for a month at a time. At the beginning of the service, one of the ushers would light our taperlighters and we would walk slowly down the aisle and up the steps to the chancel. And we would light the candles on either side of the cross on the altar. It was my favorite part of the week. Really. Lighting the candles in church. Because Miss Brumfield taught us that this was a *holy* thing we did each Sunday, to bring the light into the

sanctuary and let people know that Jesus was there. That's what she said. "Jesus is the Light of the world. And when you light the candles it reminds all the people out there that Jesus is here... And he *is*, you know. Jesus is here."

I looked at that picture and it reminded me of all that. But the evergreen tree in the picture wasn't in front of the church. At least not *our church*. That picture was taken at *another* church -- a church in Huntington, on Fifth Avenue. I was an acolyte at the big Presbyterian Church on Fifth Avenue for about an hour, I guess, when my neighbor's son was married.

And it all came back to me. I was an acolyte in their wedding. It was my job to carry the light into the place where they would be married and light the altar candles and all the other candles there in the church. And there were about a gazillion of them. "Forty-eleven" on one side and just as many on the other. And in the middle there was this great arch of candles. More candles than there were on my mom's birthday cake! And it was my job to light every one of them! And for the very same reason I did it at our church on Sunday mornings. I was there to light the candles and remind people that Jesus was there. And judging from the number of candles they had at that wedding, they must have *really* needed to know that that day! Somebody needed to know in the worst way that Jesus was there. (It's not a bad thing to know on your wedding day is it? Truth is it's not such a bad thing to remember on *any* day -- that Jesus is here.)

The world could use a few *more* acolytes these days. Really, it could. Claire and Kendyl here are *specialists*, you know. And so are their confreres and cohorts. And so was I, I suppose, when I was a kid. We were **acolytes** -- "**attendants**" the word means. Highly skilled specialists in **pyro-liturgics**. (Don't you just love the sound of that? I just wish I'd

thought if it when I was a kid.) They are acolytes. And they are here to bring the light into the sanctuary and let us know that Jesus is here.

But a couple of thousand years ago it wasn't that way. Things were a bit simpler then. Attendants in worship were not specialists, really. They were general practitioners. Which means they had to do a little of everything. So in those days they didn't just light the candles at weddings, *they were bridesmaids, too*. Which is fine for people like Kendyl and Claire. But for Spencer and Jake and Gary and *their kind ...* I don't know. Can you picture them in bridesmaids' gowns carrying a little bouquet of flowers? Well you get the picture. It might be a bit of a problem.

So the attendants in those days were all young women. And I don't know if they carried flowers, or wore dresses that matched the punch in the punch bowl, or did all the things bridesmaids do now. But it was their job to bring the light into the gathering and let people know that the bridegroom was there.

And these ten bridesmaids here (in Jesus' little story) were ready to do that. At least they *thought* they were ready. But some of them weren't. Because... you know how it is with weddings -- they don't always start on time. These days it's the rehearsal that always gets started late. But in those days it was the wedding. Because the groom had to go haggle with the bride's father over her dowry. Can you imagine? My father-in-law would have asked *me* for money. "If you want to marry *my* daughter it's going to cost you..." And it did. Oh, it did... But it wasn't so back then. The woman came with accessories. Family heirlooms. Trust funds. Goats and chickens -- that sort of thing. So they haggled. They cut a deal for this woman. And a thing like that could take awhile. And it did. It did.

The bridesmaids were ready to carry their lamps and let everyone know that the bridegroom was there. But he *wasn't* there. So they waited ... and waited. All through the evening they waited. But the groom didn't show. And then, just around midnight, when they had all fallen asleep, someone shouted out. "He's here! The bridegroom is here!"

And they all jumped to their feet and snatched up their lamps, ready to do what they had been chosen to do. But half of their lamps had burned out already. And those five bridesmaids, whose lamps had gone out, didn't have any oil. They hadn't brought any with them -- only what was already there in their lamps. ✘ But the others were wise, mind you. They knew something like this could happen. So they brought a little extra just in case.

Oh, and you know the story. The foolish attendants said to the others, "We don't have any oil. Our lamps are burned out. Please, let us have some of yours." But the other bridesmaids, who really were wise, said, "No. It's a long way to the groom's father's house. There just isn't enough for you *and* for us."

They weren't being stingy, mind you, or harsh. They were just being practical. Because if they shared *their* oil with the others, then they all might have just a wee bit of oil. And it might all burn out on the way to the wedding place. And then **who would bring the light?** Who would lift up their lamps? And if no one was there to lift up the light, how would anyone know that the bridegroom was there? So the wise attendants said to the foolish, "No. *We can't. If you need some more oil, you'll have to go and buy it on your own.*"

And while the five foolish bridesmaids were out trying to find someone who'd sell them some oil (at *midnight*, mind you) the others went with the bridegroom. And they carried their lamps so that others

in the neighborhood could see that the bridegroom had come. And they could follow him to his father's house for the great wedding banquet. And they did. They did. And the wedding began with a great feast and a celebration.

In the meantime, the others finally found someone who would sell them a little oil. But by the time they got to the father's house it was too late. The door was shut.... So the foolish attendants knocked at the door. "Please let us in! How were we to know when to be ready? It isn't our fault." Ah, but Jesus said they would hear the bridegroom say, "I don't even know who you are."

**So stay awake. Be ready. You don't know what day or what hour he will come.**

He *is* coming, you know. What is it we say when we gather at the Lord's Table for holy communion? **Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will... come again.**

In a few more weeks -- in two more weeks -- while the rest of the world is decked out with tinsel and garland and silver and gold and Christmas reds and greens, the Church will robe itself with purple. And ... do you know what purple *stands* for? It was the color priests wore (and still wear) when they heard confessions. It's the color that calls the people of God to open their hearts again to the Lord. For while the rest of the world is preparing for the holidays, the church prepares for the *Advent*, the "Coming." Not the coming of the holidays, really. No, we wait for the coming of Christ. The One who comes to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to set prisoners free. The One who will open our blinded eyes that we might see *him* in our sisters and brothers. The One who comes to mend broken lives and heal broken hearts and restore broken spirits. We wait for the One who brings new

life even in the shadows of economic uncertainty and war and disaster and hunger and death.

And advent, with all of its symbols and signs, is there to remind us that Christ is *coming* not only in final victory or as a babe in Bethlehem's stable. But he comes here and now, in every moment of our lives. In every encounter, in every situation. To every heart and every life. In the weak and the poor. In the hungry and the hurting. In the people we'd rather not have to deal with and even in the stranger who comes asking for help, Jesus comes. He's already here.

But for some reason ... well, I think there are an awful lot of people these days who don't know that. They don't know that Jesus is here. So he's searching acolytes, for someone to bring the light and let them know he's here. Someone who will **let their light so shine before others that they will see their good work and give glory to God.** ✕

It takes a special kind of person to do that, you know. Someone whose heart is open to love and whose hands are open to serve. It isn't a job for people who are selfish or those who look down on others. It's not well-suited for those who don't want to "get their hands dirty", either. But God is looking for someone who is wise. Someone who carries a little extra oil. Someone who knows where to turn when their lamp's burning low.... The truth is he's searching for someone like you.

I remember a couple of years ago (in December) I was in the guesthouse for breakfast at Saint Meinrad (the monastery in Indiana). And after a few moments a man walked up with his tray in his hands and asked if he could join me. So we had breakfast together. And he asked if I'd been there before, and what kind of work I did -- the usual sort of thing strangers talk about, I suppose, when they meet for breakfast. And so I told him about my call to ministry, and about growing up in Wayne County, and everything nearly from grade school

to seminary and on, I suppose. And I learned from him that he was a Christian motivational speaker and a writer. And that's why he was there. He had come just to get away, he said, and get some writing done before Christmas.

And he talked about his prayer life and his faith in God. And he told about some of the people who'd inspired him -- people whose lives had given shape to his faith. And one of them was his father.

One day, when he was about twelve years old, his dad took him to the circus. One of the big ones, like Barnum and Bailey, I guess. And the ticket line was long -- *really* long, he said. So they had to stand and wait. And right in front of them, he said, was a family that made a big impression on him. There were about ten of them, he said. The father and mother, of course, and eight children who all looked to be younger than he was. Eight kids, all under twelve -- and *they* wanted to see a circus?

Well, he could tell that they were not very well off. Their clothes were neat, but they were cheaply made and pretty well worn. And the kids were all well-behaved. But they were excited -- you could just see it in their faces, he said. And from the way they were talking, he said, he was sure they'd never seen anything *like* a circus before. Because they were saying to each other that they couldn't wait to see a real live elephant, and a circus clown, and all the other things they might see. They just couldn't wait!

"And they were right in front of us," he said, "in this long line waiting to buy their tickets." And when it was finally their turn, the mom and dad stepped up to the ticket window. And the father said, "We'd like two adult tickets and eight children's tickets." And he smiled and said, "I'm taking my whole family to see the circus today!" And the writer said, "You could see him just *beaming* with pride."

And then the ticket woman told him the price. And the mother looked down at the ground and the father's lip started trembling. He stepped a little closer and said, "How much did you say?" And she repeated the price. And you could just tell that the man didn't have enough money. Can you imagine having to tell eight kids who were looking forward to the most exciting time of their lives that he didn't have enough money to take them to the circus?

But the writer said that before the man could do anything, his father reached into his pocket, pulled out a twenty and let it drop to the ground. ("And we were none too wealthy," he said.) And just as it touched the ground, he said, his father reached down and picked it up. And he tapped the man the shoulder. And he said, "Excuse me, sir. This fell out of your pocket."

And the man *knew*, he said. *He knew*. He wasn't the kind that would ever have asked anyone for a *nickel*. But it was plain to see he appreciated the help. Because it would have embarrassed him terribly and it would have broken his heart to tell his children they couldn't go to the circus. And he said, "That man looked straight into my dad's eyes, took my dad's hand in both of his hands, and said with his lip quivering and a tear rolling down his face, "Thank you, sir. This means more to you than I can say."

And he said he and his dad went back to their car and drove home. "We didn't get to go to the circus," he said. "But my dad gave me something I'll never forget. He let me see him treat another person the way he thought Jesus would treat them -- with love and tenderness and respect. And that -- that one small gesture has done more to shape my life in Christ than anything else I've ever experienced."

That's what I call being an acolyte for Christ. For that kind of attitude, that kind of love brings light. And in that light, the light of your kindness and self-giving love, others will know that Jesus is here....

God's looking for someone like that. The truth is he's looking for someone just like you to carry the light and let people here in this place (in South Charleston) know that Jesus is here.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen

SOLI DEO GLORIA  
BENEN, OBLSB

