

**Homily at the Opening of Our Fiftieth Anniversary Year:  
6 November 2012**

*(Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)*

I welcome Bishop Dunne, parish leaders present and past, and all of you who have been part of our parish's first fifty years. I and all of us are delighted to share this happy moment with you. And so to the Word of God:

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Saint Matthew got the last line wrong. The point of Jesus' story is not, "Stay awake!" – for, after all, both the wise and the foolish girls fell asleep as the bridegroom was "delayed in coming." The point is, "Do not be unprepared! You will meet a future different from the one you expected." And that's been, in so many ways, the story of Our Lady of Grace.

Our very existence is the result of a surprise – the move of so many families to the suburbs after World War II that new housing (and new parishes) had to rise on tulip fields. Yet some people were ready – ready to venture on joining a brand-new parish, ready to worship in unexpected places, ready to sacrifice to see the buildings around us rise through the years. What to do to be faithful wasn't spelled out for them, but they found the ways: That generation had oil for its lamps.

Then a few years later, as the school building rose, another surprise: Too many potential students, no fair way to choose who would attend. And so, a surprising, resourceful change in course: an innovative catechetical center instead of a school, so that all the children of the parish could be served equitably. That generation had oil for its lamps.

Through fifty years the surprises have continued: The liturgy changes of Vatican Council II, requiring that the interior of the church be redesigned. The fire in the old rectory and need to build a new one; the vision of care for people with special needs that led to our program in faith formation for such people, to increased handicap access to our buildings, to the houses run by Catholic Charities on the corner of our property... to the creation of Christa House as a final home for the dying poor at the times of the AIDS crisis, and now its conversion to a home for developmentally disabled people. Over more than one generation, parishioners have had oil for the lamps.

We begin our celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our parish by recognizing and thanking the generations who have made it possible for us to be here today – whose energy, imagination, financial sacrifice, and readiness to respond to novel circumstances have led to this moment. They – you – have been, like the wise girls in today's Gospel, prepared well for a future full of novelty. Their – your – courage and foresight challenge us now. We need to ask how we are to carry on that heritage and build on it. What must we be prepared for, and how are we to prepare. What are we likely to need for oil for our lamps for?

No one can know the future, but from present trends we can see the shape of a few challenges.

First, families are changing. Our parish has always dedicated a great deal of energy to forming young people in the faith. Today – and in the likely future – many of those young people will grow up in families much different from those of the 1960s: More single-parent households, more blended families, more families headed by grandparents rather than parents, more families burdened with unemployment, with addictions, with parents or siblings in prison. We will need oil for our lamps to know how to help them.

Those families, those young people also face today a challenging and often dispiriting economy and society. From the crassness of so much media to the burdens of massive debt to the lack of good jobs, to the mistrust of leadership in government, business, and – sad to say, in church – people need the Gospel perhaps more than in the past if they are to have hope and purpose. We will need oil for our lamps to know how to help them.

At the other end of life, people are living and being active longer. Our congregation is much greyer of hair than when we were founded, and we need not only to help seniors by removing obstacles around our buildings (stairs and doors that get in the way), but by offering places for them to use their gifts in this new phase of life. We will need oil for our lamps to know how to help them.

The second challenge: We can anticipate a future of scarce and expensive natural resources, especially energy. Our buildings waste our resources by not being as efficient as they should be. Built for an era of cheap and abundant energy, we need to find ways to have them continue to serve our mission and our people with less waste of your donations. The Gospel will be preached – the sacraments will be celebrated – the faith will be taught – the poor will be served – in these buildings for the coming decades. We need to invest in their care and improvement to make them better tools to serve the Gospel mission. We will need oil for our lamps to prepare them wisely.

The third challenge: The scarcest resource in the future will not be one we can hold in our hands – it will be people's time and attention. The young people who first came through the doors of this church had no cellphones, no iPads, no Facebook to update, no YouTube. Making disciples has always required a great deal of time and energy and attention – not only from catechists and preachers, but from the prospective disciples themselves. It is no secret that Christian formation has, despite many people's best efforts, been less successful over the past decades than we might have hoped. (Your own children's and grandchildren's level of practice of the faith may well give sad testimony to that.) We will need oil for our lamps if we are to hand on the heritage of faith that we have been given, and not have the Gospel message and invitation crowded out by the commercial media marketplace.

Where do we get oil for our lamps? The same places the generations before us did. The oil that will light the future is a living friendship with the Risen Christ, nurtured and expressed in our four touchstones:

- ✧ Prayer, first. Without spending time each day with our God, we lose touch, lose direction, finally lose hope.

- ✦ Presence at the Sunday Eucharist each week. The Holy Spirit comes to us, guides us, and inspires us when we pray together at the Lord's table.
- ✦ Witness each day, as well. Trying to love God and neighbor at each moment challenges us to learn how to serve the Gospel effectively.
- ✦ Support, finally, for one another in our speech and actions; sacrifice for the mission of our parish; generosity with the gifts God has given to us... Support for others changes us, breaks us out of self-centeredness, and multiplies the good work we do.

Prayer; presence; witness, and support. These build a living friendship with the Risen Christ, the source of oil for discipleship and ministry that is always ready and never exhausted.

For the next decades we will need to be wise – to be prepared to give evidence of the power of the Gospel in a society of limited resources, of distraction and competition for attention, and of new sorts of families and households. I'll have more to say about these things as our anniversary year continues. Today, I'll close by turning for just a moment to today's first reading, to another sort of feminine figure in the Scriptures, Lady Wisdom. We will need her, and we are assured that "she is readily perceived by those who love her, and found by those who seek her." Our heritage here is shaped by generations who have "watch[ed] for her at dawn" so they could respond well to the surprises of our first fifty years. We will have to do the same.

And we know, of course, that generations of Christian commentators have seen in Lady Wisdom a prefiguring of Our Blessed Mother, under whose patronage our parish lives. "Grace" is a shorthand way of describing God's visible generosity, vitality, and energy – the felt form of God's love. What better patron for the challenges we face, so we can be among those with "oil in our lamps" as we look each moment for how the Bridegroom is about to come into our midst?