

Choices
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – Nov. 8, 2020

Please Read:
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Matthew 25:1-13

It has been quite a week. And now it is finally finished, over, done, and the choice has been made. And of course, I'm not talking about the last-minute decision to go to virtual-only worship service this morning to mitigate any risk of spreading the CV-19 virus, as difficult as that was on short notice. The American electorate made a historic choice. While we are about as divided as ever on what the right choice is, and technically it won't be officially over until the electoral meets in December, more people voted than ever before in our nation's history. And for the first time, we have a woman as Vice President-Elect, a woman born of immigrant parents, and from Jamaican and Indian descent. I appreciated President-Elect Joe Biden's reminding us that we now have a choice in going forward, and I pray that we will choose to build bridges, not walls, that we will live from hope and not from fear, that we will come together as a people and act like the *e pluribus unum* nation we say we are.

Our lectionary texts affirm how important choices are. I admit that as one who trusts in the providence of God, it's tempting to minimize the importance of the choices we make in life and that *love covers a multitude of sins*. But the fact of the matter is that our choices matter. Our choices have consequences, and some of the choices we make are irreversible and can have irrevocable outcomes.

According to Matthew, it was toward the end of his earthly life when Jesus told the parable of the ten maidens. The parable begins with a gracious invitation to come to a party. Yet in today's lesson, the bridegroom, the one for whom the party has been organized, is delayed. Knowing that oil is needed for their lamps, some of the guests go and buy more oil so they will have enough, just in case the wait is long. But others have other things to do, or they have nothing to do, and for whatever reason, they fail to go get more oil. At last, late in the night, there is a shout, "The bridegroom is here! Let the party begin!"

Those who have no oil for their lamps scurry through the streets to buy the needed oil. But by the time they return, it's too late. The door is shut. They bang on the door, but no, the party has begun, the door is shut, and it is too late. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like that. And that's why I don't particularly like this parable.

I like stories of parties, of gracious invitations, and this story begins that way. Yet there are those words, those haunting, final, so very final words which have to do with the Kingdom of God, and with you and me: "And the door was shut." Even when from the outside the maidens called, Lord, Lord, open to us," the bridegroom replies, "Truly I tell you; I do not know you." That's terrifying to me.

What's happened to grace? The maidens may be foolish, imprudent, but they are not evil. Yet, when they get there, the door is shut, locked, bolted, and they are excluded.

On the one hand, there is extravagant grace, and on the other, there is harsh indifference and judgment unless you are prepared and first in line. What about the wise maidens who don't share with the foolish maidens? How does this line up with Jesus' teaching at the end of this chapter about giving to "the least of these"?

I know that consistency is not everything, but why does Jesus give such seemingly contradictory descriptions of the kingdom of heaven?

I don't know, except perhaps because life is really like that, and the gospel is really like that. In one sense, there is always time to accept the invitation. How many Sundays have you sat here in church and heard the good news? How many times have you heard the stories about how God is gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast, never-ending love? That there is still time for you?

Yet there always comes that time, *when there is no more time!* Life is like that. Elections are like that. School is like that. Marriage is like that. Taxes and death are like that.

Does that sound negative? Or, *does it sound merely true?*

Alvin Toffler, the author of *Future Shock*, says we live in a time of "the peril of over-choice." We have more choices, more options than any age before us, and that has become our problem rather than our solution. Do we have too many choices? You may think this trite, but Kim and I are still awed by the number of choices we face when we go shopping for food at our local grocery. It's so many more than anywhere else we've lived in the world. This is the "digital age" when through the web, we have access to more information than ever before in the history of our species.

Philosophically, this is also the age of "post-modernity" and "relativity." How can you commit your life to anything if nothing is ultimate if you always have other options? No wonder we often stand there befuddled, not knowing whether to step forward or to step back, unable to choose anything for fear we may choose the wrong thing, paralyzed by "over-choice." Over-choice often leads to no choice.

So, when Joshua addresses the tribe of Israel, urging them to "Choose this day whom you will serve," whether it be the true God of Israel or idols, I wonder if Joshua's words are meant for us? When Jesus tells of these young women who fail to move, fail to act, fail to prepare themselves for the bridegroom's arrival, I wonder if he is speaking directly to us?

"Someday, I'm going to commit my life to the Way of Christ..."

"Someday, I'm going to spend more time with my family..."

"Someday, I'm going to forgive that person..."

"Someday, I'm going to face my addiction..."

"Someday, I'm going to pray more and study the Bible..."

"Someday, I'm going to give a tithe & make time to serve the poor."

It can seem like there will always be time to consider the foundation for our lives, to wrestle with the hard questions of how we commit ourselves to that which has durative meaning and value. But not to decide is to decide. Not to act is to act. The young women in the parable may not have thought they were rejecting the offer of the party when they did nothing, but they were. Their inability to decide and act on their decision had dire consequences. It sounds so harsh, so severe, so unlike Jesus.

Those thundering, awful words - *and the door was shut, "I do not know you."*

The word decision comes from the Latin meaning "to cut." One reason why we fail to decide is that we know that, in deciding, we are cutting off some options to embrace others. Yet every day is a day of decision because every day some doors are being closed, every day we are being cut off from certain possibilities.

The rather obvious fact remains that life does not go on forever. There will not always be tomorrow. Today is the day for a decision, as is every day. "Choose this day whom you will serve," says Joshua. "And the door was shut," says Jesus.

No, I don't like this parable of the foolish maidens who are locked out of the party when the door was shut. I don't like it, not because I don't understand it, or because I can't believe that something like this could happen. I don't like it, because *it is true, and because it confronts me with my foolish procrastination and indecision.*

In *Jacob the Baker*, Noah Ben Shea tells the following story.

"Once there was a fool who set out for the king's palace. Along the way, people pointed and jeered at the fool. 'Why should a man like you be going to see the king?' they laughed.

"'Well, I'm going to be the king's teacher,'" answered the fool with great assurance. But his conviction only brought louder laughter from the people along the path.

"When the fool arrived at the palace, the king thought he would make short work and great jest of this man. So, the king had the fool brought directly to the royal court.

"'Why do you dare to disturb the king?'" demanded His Majesty.

"'I come to be the royal teacher,'" said the fool in a very matter-of-fact manner.

"The king twisted with laughter. 'How can you, a fool, teach me?'"

"'You see,'" said the fool, 'already you ask me questions.'

"The court froze silent. The king gathered himself and stared at his ridiculous opponent. 'You have offered me a clever response, but you have not answered my questions!'"

"'Only a fool has all the answers,'" came the reply, balanced on a shy smile.

"'But, but' now the king was sputtering, 'but what would others say if they knew the king had a fool for a teacher?'"

"'Better to have a fool for a teacher than a fool for a king,'" said the fool.

"When he heard this, the king, who was not a bad man, confessed, 'Now, I do feel like a fool.'

"'No,' said the man across from him, 'tis only a fool who has never felt like one.'"

How about you? Ever felt like a fool before, even like a foolish maiden? If there is anything that we need to do to respond to Jesus' parable, it is first to repent, to reflect, and change our minds. To admit our foolishness and lack of attention to the important choices of life, or our failure to make wise choices.

But we also need to hear the surprising good news that is behind and around this parable: Jesus chose for us, a choice for you. He chose to love you, even unto death, and he did not turn back from that choice. He made the ultimate choice to give everything for you, to lay down his life for you. Jesus may be the bridegroom in the parable, but in real life, he went beyond the darkness to real death, outside the door, and through the very gates of hell to rescue all who would join the party.

Historic choices have been made this week, but I wager there's a more important choice that some of you have yet to make today. It's a choice to wake up and receive the invitation to celebrate with the Lord of life, to join that party of the faithful who have simply said yes, Lord Jesus, I am yours; Fill me with the oil of your love! Perhaps you feel like a fool in the choices you've made in life. Just remember only a fool's never felt like a fool. Remember that only a fool will continue to live and act like today's decisions have no impact on tomorrow's outcomes.

One of my favorite sayings is simply, "The days are long, but the years are short." Jesus challenges you to consider your choices in life and the commitments you are making. This is at the root of what we are going to be talking about when you hear the word Stewardship in the coming weeks. Too often we think that stewardship is all about money, but how we invest and commit our financial resources is only a function of what is in our hearts, a derivative of the deeper commitments to God or other idols of this world.

So today, I urge you to choose wisely, which is an invitation to reflect on what it means for you to make your choices with faith in the One who has given everything for you, and he graciously invites you to join the banquet feast of the Bridegroom. Here, now, the door is open to you.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. AMEN.