

Choices and Consequences
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – November 12, 2023

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

This past week we had elections in New Canaan, and it all went rather smoothly. While there was some tension around the school board, most people would agree we couldn't go wrong with either Amy Murphy or Dionna Carlson for First Selectman. As we all know, national elections a year from now will be far more contentious and consequential.

Today's parable is not one of my favorites. The moral is at least 'be prepared.' Jesus sounds more like a Scout leader than, well, Jesus. But it's also a parable about choices and how choices have consequences.

It was toward the end of his earthly life when Jesus told this parable. It begins, like so many others, with an invitation, a gracious invitation to come to a party. It thus reminds us of all the other parties, such as the party that the father threw for the returning prodigal son, when a gracious, extravagant host invites everyone to come and make merry; or the one about the banquet feast where the invited guests didn't come, so the host sent the servants out to invite the poor and the lame off the street to come...

Yet in today's lesson, the bridegroom, the one for whom the party has been organized, is delayed. Some people wander off while they await his arrival. Knowing that oil will be 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 is too late. The door is shut. They bang on the door but no, the party has begun, the door is shut, it is too late. Jesus says that God's kingdom is like that. And that's why I don't particularly like this story.

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 closed."

This parable seems to be in such tension with so many other stories and saying of Jesus. Did not Jesus tell many stories of the open door, the very open, always available hospitality and generosity at God's household where all were welcome, no matter what the hour of their arrival? Now, what's this talk of the closed door?

Remember the parable about the workers in the vineyard? Some workers come at dawn and begin to work. Others come at noon and go to work; some get there in the middle of the afternoon, and finally, some come just one hour before quitting time. In the end, the master pays everyone the same wage, beginning with those who got there last.

See? The door is always open! Don't worry that you did not get here until the midnight hour. There is still room for you. God is gracious, always, forever gracious. But now, in this parable, what's happened to the 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.

These two stories, by the way, the one about the workers in the vineyard and now the wise and foolish maidens are found within a couple chapters of one another in the same gospel! I know that consistency is not everything, but why on earth would Matthew include both of those stories in the same gospel?

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 gospel invitation? 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 also like that. The little beeper on the machine falls silent, the EKG line goes flat, the ticking heart stops, we gasp, life flashes before our eyes, and it is over. The door is shut.

Does that sound morbid? Or does it sound merely *true*? Biblical commentators believe this parable of the wise and foolish maidens, all this talking about being prepared, waiting, watching for the arrival of the bridegroom, was addressed to a church that had become frustrated waiting for the return of the Christ. Christ promised that he would return, that he would bring to fulfillment all that he had begun. But where was he? The waiting had become long and hard.

It has been nearly two thousand years since those days, and two thousand years is a very long time to wait and to watch. But I wonder if this parable may be even more urgently addressed to our church. It's not only a matter that we have been waiting even longer than Matthew's church waited, it's also a matter that we live in an age in which the language of decision, of crisis seems most strange.

Years ago, in his book *Future Shock*, futurist Alvin Toffler noted that 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. We have too many choices. I just read researchers estimate the average person makes over 35,000 decisions every day. This or that. Yes or no. We have more access to more information than ever before in the history of our species. We even have AI to think through our choices for us! This is the age of "postmodernism" and "relativity." How can you commit your life to anything if nothing is really ultimate? if everything is relative? No wonder that we often stand there befuddled, not knowing whether to step forward or to step back, unable to choose anything out of fear that we may choose the wrong thing, paralyzed by "over-choice." Over-choice often leads to no choice.

In a 1936 speech to the British Parliament, Winston Churchill said, "The era of procrastination, of half-measures, of soothing and baffling

expedients, of delays, is coming to its close. In its place, we are entering a period of consequences.”

Indeed, when Joshua addresses the tribe of Israel in today's first lesson, urging them to "Choose this day whom you will serve," whether it be the true God or idols, I think 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, that we are in a period of “consequences”?

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

"Someday, I'm going to say, 'I'm sorry.'"

"Someday, I'm going to say, 'I forgive you.'"

"Someday, I'm going to say, 'I love you.'"

"Someday, I'm going to quit that habit..."

"Someday, I'm going to give to make the world a better place..."

"When I retire, I hope to devote more time to serving others..."

You get the idea... There will always be time to lay the foundation for our lives, to deal 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 Jesus' parable may not have thought they were rejecting the offer of the party when they did nothing, but they were. Their inability to decide or act had dire consequences. It sounds so harsh, so severe, so unlike the graciousness of Jesus. Those thundering, awful words - *and the door was shut...*

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

One last thought: On November 19, 1863 (that would be exactly 160 years ago today!), Abraham Lincoln delivered one of the most famous speeches in American history: the Gettysburg Address. The Union victory at Gettysburg was a key moment in the Civil War—thwarting General Robert E. Lee's invasion of the North. President Lincoln offered his brief speech

in a dedication ceremony for a new national cemetery near the Gettysburg battlefield. Lincoln was not even the featured speaker that day. Noted orator Edward Everett spoke for nearly two hours, while Lincoln spoke for a mere two minutes. In his address, Lincoln embraced the Declaration of Independence, recalling how the nation was “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

By resurrecting these promises, Lincoln committed post-Civil War America to “a new birth of freedom.” Following the Civil War, the Reconstruction Amendments—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments—abolished slavery, wrote the Declaration of Independence’s commitment to freedom and equality into the Constitution, and promised to ban racial discrimination in voting. In so doing, the amendments sought to make Lincoln’s “new birth of freedom” a constitutional reality.

On this weekend when we honor those who made the choice to serve in uniform, some who made the ultimate sacrifice, it’s worth reflecting again on what are the choices that are before us? And what are the consequences? What are the gods you are serving and how’s that working out for you? The Good News is that Jesus gives you clarity, even if it is a warning. There are wise and foolish choices. You cannot continue to live and act like today's decisions have no impact on tomorrow's consequences.

Choose wisely. Choose today to live ...

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