

Sermon – “Choices Which Define Us”

Scripture Readings: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-15, Matthew 25:1-13

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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Springfield, IL

Our first scripture reading is Joshua 24. Here Joshua asks the people of Yahweh to make choices that will define who they are and whose they are. As they settle into the Promised Land, Israel is just beginning to come into her own. The people are asked not only to identify their God, but also to shape their own identity by how they will serve the God they choose. Will they abide by the Torah – the law of the covenant and serve “with integrity and faithfulness?” Will God’s word be a “lamp to their feet and a light to their path?” Hear now the word of God.

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. 2 And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. 3 Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. ..15 Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." 16 Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods. Amen.

With Joshua’s question echoing in our mind we turn to the second scripture reading in Matthew 25:1-13. Matthew 25 includes three parables about the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness. Parables are wisdom stories! Jesus' parables help us consider matters of faith through well-known, everyday experiences. In today’s story, the first century wedding custom of the bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom with oil lamps reminds us that we are each responsible to tend the light of God's life within. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

1 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." 9 But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." 12 But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The title of the Sermon: “Choices Which Define Us”

Text: “...choose this day whom you will serve...” Joshua 24:14b

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, Give us wisdom in the choices we make. As we reflect on your word, which is a lamp to our feet, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Marian Wright Edelman published the story of her life's journey in a book entitled *Lanterns: A Memoir of Mentors*. Many of us know Dr. Edelman as the Founder and President of the Children's Defense Fund. Established in 1973 this organization became the voice for poor children, children of color and children with disabilities. A graduate of Yale Law School, Dr. Edelman was active in the Civil Rights Movement and the first African American woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar. Her choice of the biblical metaphor "lanterns" for the mentors in her life sheds light on today's parable.

According to Matthew, the lack of light in the foolish bridesmaid's lamps symbolized the lack of something at the core of their being; something that could not be given to them by the other bridesmaids. It wasn't simply that they had overslept or were late for the festivities. It was the choices they made along the way, which formed their character and substance.

Throughout Scripture light symbolizes God's presence, from Moses' encounter with Yahweh at the burning bush to Mary's unexpected meeting with the Risen Lord at sunrise on Easter morning. To this day synagogues and Roman Catholic cathedrals maintain a continuous burning light to symbolize God's presence. This tradition can be traced back to the oil lamps within the Ark of the Covenant, which the Israelites carried into the Promised Land with Joshua. Each Sunday our acolytes carry the lighted torch into the sanctuary at the beginning of worship to symbolize God's presence. The light is carried out at the end of the service as a reminder that we bring God's light into the world by living our faith in the choices we make.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages his followers to let their light shine that people may see their good works and glorify God. Oil, in Jewish tradition, is also a symbol of good deeds and the Torah, God's Holy Word. Martin Luther understood the oil to represent faith, which sustains light in our lives.

Matthew chose the metaphors of oil and light in this parable to remind the early church of what is important to God and what will matter in the end. The right confession without the corresponding life is meaningless. Deeds of love, kindness and mercy are what make the difference in the kingdom of God.

This parable is about the choices we make, the daily, consistent choices, which define who we are. This is a parable about discipline, perseverance, character and faith. The bridesmaids with oil in their lamps when the bridegroom returns may not have always been sure about their theology or themselves for that matter, however they understood what was expected of them as God's children. Their conscious and deliberate choices demonstrated the presence of God's spirit in their lives and illuminated the way for the children of God who followed them. These are the "Lanterns" that Marian Wright Edelman writes about in her book and the mentors for whom she gives thanks in this prayer.

O God, I thank you for the lanterns in my life who illumined dark and uncertain paths, who calmed and stilled debilitating doubts and fears with encouraging words, wise lessons, gentle touches, firm nudges, and faithful actions along my journey of life and back to you.

Listen to some of the insights Dr. Edelman shares on her journey of life. Words that provide a wake-up call consistent with that of Joshua and the parable of the ten bridesmaids. She writes:

In many ways the labyrinth of my life is leading back to where I began and to the many lessons learned but too easily lost in the noise and clutter and triviality and depersonalization afflicting

so much of modern American life and culture. With others I seek to reweave the frayed remnants of family, community, and spiritual values rent asunder in the name of progress. That much racial, social, and scientific progress has taken place over my lifetime is evident. But something important has been lost as we have traded so much of our spiritual heritage for a false sense of economic security and inclusion. We are at risk of letting our children drown in the bath water of American materialism, greed, and violence. We must regain our moral bearings and roots and help America recover hers before our precious children---Black, Brown and White, poor, middle-class, and rich---grow up thinking life is about acquiring rather than sharing, selfishness rather than sacrifice, and material rather than spiritual wealth.

Dr. Edelman articulates an important truth and the need to reclaim our spiritual identity as the children of God, to choose the daily rituals which give light and life to our faith...rituals such as the reading of God's word, the listening for God's voice in meditation, prayer and silence, the intentional acts of kindness and mercy and hospitality which sustains the family and community. These are the choices which define us and matter to God.

And so... Joshua's question is as relevant today as it was 1200 years before Christ....*whom will we serve?* We make fundamental choices every day of our lives about what we will share, the sacrifices we will make and the kind of wealth we will seek.

Those of us who follow Facebook may have noticed that Hannah Dreitcer, our Associate Pastor for Family Ministry, posted a Huffington Post article on her page this week entitled *The Number One Reason Teens Keep their Faith as Young Adults* by David Briggs. According to a recent, landmark study of youth and religion, *Mothers and fathers who practice what they preach and preach what they practice are far and away the major influence related to adolescents keeping the faith...*parents who worship with their children, parents who talk about faith in their home and parents who give of themselves in community service are the lanterns in their children's lives.

As we gather for Holy Communion in anticipation of the Messianic banquet, may *we keep our lamps trimmed and burning*, and so illuminate the way as we wait in hope for the bridegroom. Amen.