

Sermon – “To Serve and Obey”

Sunday, November 12, 2017

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

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Our first reading relates part of the Israelite leader Joshua’s final speech to the Israelite people. He, like Moses did before him, has come now to the end of his life and reminds the people of the story of God alongside them. Hear these words from the book of Joshua, chapter 24, verses 1 to 3a, and continuing with verses 14 through 25.

*<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3a</sup>Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.*

*<sup>14</sup>“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve [the LORD] in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup>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.”*

*<sup>16</sup>Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; <sup>17</sup>for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. [The LORD] protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; <sup>18</sup>and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for [the LORD] is our God.”*

*<sup>19</sup>But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for [the LORD] is a holy God. [The LORD] is a jealous God; [the LORD] will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. <sup>20</sup>If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then [the LORD] will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” <sup>21</sup>And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!” <sup>22</sup>Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve [the LORD].” And they said, “We are witnesses.” <sup>23</sup>He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” <sup>24</sup>The people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and [the LORD] we will obey.” <sup>25</sup>So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.*

Our second reading comes to us from the Gospel According to Matthew, chapter 25, verses 1 through 13. Listen for the Word of the Lord to you as Jesus offers a parable to his disciples as he begins to approach the end of his earthly life and ministry.

*<sup>1</sup>“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup>Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup>When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; <sup>4</sup>but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. <sup>5</sup>As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. <sup>6</sup>But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ <sup>7</sup>Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup>The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ <sup>9</sup>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.’ <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ <sup>12</sup>But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ <sup>13</sup>Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”*

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The people are gathered together: the elders, the leaders, the heads of all the tribes and places of the whole nation. Joshua, the man who has led them across the river Jordan and into the promised land, the successor of Moses, a prophet of the LORD, has brought them together at the end of his life to remind them of their story as the people of God and to renew the covenant.

He tells them: “Revere the LORD...serve [the LORD] in sincerity and faithfulness.”

He asks them: Can you do it? Will you do it? “[I]f you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve.”

He warns them when they give their first answer: “You cannot serve the LORD, for the Lord is a holy God. The Lord is a jealous God.” This is not a small commitment, he warns, not a small promise. You cannot just speak the words here; you must be in it for the long haul, or you will be consumed by the holiness you have walked into and then failed to live out.

Some twelve hundred years later, another leader has gathered his own followers together near the end of his life, for his own final extended sermon to them. This one teaches in parables, and he gives his own tale and his own warning.

“Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.”

The story comes in the middle of a lengthy set of teachings near the end of the Gospel of Matthew which are full of prophecy and foretelling, promises of the future of the coming of the Son of Man and admonitions to faithful discipleship.

“When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.”

The story comes in a series of parables about being ready, being ready, for the time of his coming is not known. It follows immediately after another parable about servants caught in disobedience when their master returns earlier than expected.<sup>1</sup> This one, however, describes foolishness of people likewise unprepared but for the opposite problem, when the one whom they await returns later than expected.

“As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’”

They are denied their request, for the wise ones have enough to last, but not enough for everyone, and the foolish ones go out at midnight searching for someone to sell them oil.

“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. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’”

The story turns thus into one of warning. “Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

We hear echoes of the earlier warning from Joshua. Both tell their hearers: it is not enough just to show up. You have to be fully committed to sticking with this for the long haul. The Israelites are told that this journey needs more than a promise; it requires a permanent commitment to holiness. The disciples of Jesus are told that the kingdom of heaven means more than just showing up to meet the bridegroom; it requires sacrifice and single-minded devotion. Were the maidens without enough oil too poor to buy enough? No, they somewhere along the way let other activities, distractions and work of other sorts pull them away, and never placed the arrival of the bridegroom at the true center of their day’s plans. The fullness of what was potentially expected of them was not taken seriously enough, and making sure they were ready turned out not to have been their top priority.

What were they doing when they should have been buying oil, earlier in the day? Who knows? It does not say. It does not matter, perhaps. It was something other than what was important.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,” Jesus had already advised much earlier on the topic of what is important, “where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”<sup>2</sup>

There is a choice. There was choice for the Israelites: would they live it all the way through? Whom would they serve and obey in the end? And Jesus, too, describes the choice of what will be top priority for his hearers. Commitment to him? Or something else, some kind of treasures of this world? It is a sacrifice, choice; one thing for another. Will we stay on track? Or will we get pulled away by other things claiming to give us what we need?

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<sup>1</sup> A whole series of mini-parables on the subject, actually. See Matthew 24:36-50.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:19-21 (*New Revised Standard Version*). But for the fullness of Jesus’s discussion on the topic, see the entirety of Matthew 6.

Joshua warned the Israelites about this, and more than 1200 years later, Jesus still warned about it. The temptations are strong to live by what we see before us daily rather than by what we claim to believe lies beyond it all.

Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner, in his book *Wishful Thinking*, had something to say about that subject:

The wisdom of men is the kind of worldly wisdom that more or less all men have been living by since the cave man. It is best exemplified by such homely utterances as You've got your own life to lead, Business is business, Charity begins at home, Don't get involved, God helps those who help themselves, Safety first, and so forth.

Although this wisdom can lead on occasion to ruthlessness and indifference, it is by no means incompatible with Niceness...A man can be basically interested in nothing so much as feathering his own nest and still give generously to the Cancer Fund, be on the Board of Deacons, run for town office, and have a soft spot in his heart for children and animals.

It is in contrast to all this that what St. Paul calls "the foolishness of God" looks so foolish. Inspection stickers used to have printed on the back "Drive carefully—the life you save may be your own." That is the wisdom of men in a nutshell.

What God says, on the other hand, is "The life you save is the life you lose." In other words, the life you clutch, hoard, guard, and play safe with is in the end a life worth little to anybody, including yourself, and only a life given away for love's sake is a life worth living. To bring his point home, God shows us a man who gave his life away to the extent of dying a national disgrace without a penny in the bank or a friend to his name. In terms of men's wisdom, he was a Perfect Fool, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without making something like the same kind of a fool of himself is laboring under not a cross but a delusion.<sup>3</sup>

"[C]hoose this day whom you will serve," declared Joshua, but the right choice, he warned, won't be easy, or cheap; it will mean obeying something other than the wisdom of the world, and serving totally.

What does that mean for us?

I had the blessing of visiting recently with Westminster member Cliff Tozer, only two days before he unexpectedly died, and he shared with me some of his thoughts. It happened in the course of our conversation to come up that he had served in the Marine Corps and was at Iwo Jima. His words on that subject: "Sometimes people make too big a deal of that."

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, as quoted in an excerpt posted in an online forum by Buechner himself.

Now I was of course thinking as I heard that, “If having been at Iwo Jima isn’t a big deal, then what, exactly, does it take to constitute a ‘big deal’?” For younger people and those unfamiliar with it, the Battle of Iwo Jima, fought in February and March of 1945, was one of the bloodiest and hardest-fought battles of World War II. The United States Marines invaded this Japanese-held island on their gradual advance across the Pacific, taking it at the cost of 26,000 casualties, over six thousand, eight hundred of them killed in action. The raising of the American flag on Mt. Suribachi, after the first four days of fighting and thousands lost, was an inspirational event not only for the remaining weeks of battle there but for the entire nation, as the famous photograph of this flag-raising was printed in thousands of places, put on a postal stamp, and ultimately used as the inspiration for the sculpture at the Marine Corps War Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Big deal? Certainly. Sacrifice, risk, and danger, in defense of neighbor, nation, and, really, the world.

But while the politicians love to talk loudly and sound tough with words of war, in my experience veterans of the real thing, like Cliff, are sometimes astonishingly more humble by comparison, a lot more quiet and thoughtful about war, with hard-earned wisdom and the hope for us all to take seriously the need to live meaningfully within the space of freedom that they have bought us.

“Sometimes people make too big a deal of it,” he said, and he then started talking about how he was afraid that what people took from that kind of thing being lifted up as heroism was that war was glorious, and he didn’t think the greatness of war was what we should be emphasizing in the world. He showed me a book he’d been reading about finding deeper, spiritual truths, and his hope was that this is what people would seek after, not battle glory.

So here I was, in a hospital room, a minister of the church being ministered to; a preacher receiving a sermon, at the hands of a veteran who, despite having accomplished more heroism in one month in 1945 than I imagine I will in my lifetime, was insisting that the important things, the things which deserve our devotion, are not war glory or battle heroics, are not what the world thinks at all, that what is truly important is our seeking after the kingdom of heaven.

I am not sure I have anything worthwhile to add to that.

So are we, then, committed? Devoting ourselves truly to the things of the kingdom of God is unavoidably going to involve being a fool in the kingdom of this world, for it means living noticeably out of rhythm with the things this world values. It means living the road of faith not as a peripheral thing, but as the main thing, and as if we are in it for the long haul. Can we? Will we?

May God grant, as we examine our own hearts and lives, that we can, and do. Amen.