

Meditation – “Learning Our Limitations”

Scripture: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-16, Matthew 25:1-13

Sunday, November 8, 2020

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Our first scripture reading is Joshua 24:1-3a and 14-16. Here Joshua asks the people of Yahweh to make choices that will define who they are and whom they will become. 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 what the Spirit is saying.

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 within us. 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 meditation: Learning our Limitations

Text: "But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves." Matthew 25:9

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, give us the insight to learn our limitations in what we can give to others and the wisdom to make choices that define us as your children. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Redeemer and Guiding Light. Amen

"Once in a blue moon" is a saying used to describe something that happens only on rare occasions. "Blue Moon" is also the name of a Billie Holiday blues song and a Belgian-style beer. A "blue moon" is defined as a second full-moon occurring within 30 days of the first full-moon. Last Saturday, the "Hallowed Eve of All Saint's Day," we experienced a blue moon. The Harvest Moon on October 1st continued the tradition of filling the sky with light to allow the harvest to last into the night.

The blue moon which filled the sky a week ago Saturday also had the distinction of being visible in all the time zones of the United States. Another rare occurrence which I found rather uplifting and fortuitous. As we anticipated a Presidential Election expected to be divisive, God's light was shining across the skies of our nation, holding and reassuring us in the glow and beauty of a blue moon.

Light in the darkness of night is essential and beautiful, which is why the bridesmaids in first century Palestinian weddings carried lanterns as they waited, anticipating the bridegroom's arrival. We do not know first century marriage customs well enough to discern whether the details have been exaggerated to fit the allegory; however, we do know that the metaphor of Christ as the bridegroom was familiar to early believers who anticipated an imminent return following his death and resurrection.

The parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids and the importance of keeping one's lamp trimmed and burning sheds light on the fact that you and I are ultimately responsible for the lives we live and the choices we make. We must *learn our limitations* in terms of what we can give to other people.

Wait a second! That doesn't sound very Christian! Listen again: You and I are ultimately responsible for the lives we live and the choices we make. We must *learn our limitations* in terms of what we can give to other people.

Those of us who haven't learned our limitations read, *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.'* and our initial response is that these women are selfish rather than wise. They should have given to their unprepared friends. It never crosses our mind that we too may not have enough to go around and so we, unlike the wise bridesmaids, never learn to say NO!

However good our intentions are, the inevitable is we may also find ourselves outside when the door is shut. The real tragedy is the sense of betrayal we feel that somehow we are being punished for being good and giving and we resent what seems so unfair, that no one was there for us when we were there for someone else.

Yet, the simple truth of this parable shines brightly. Some things cannot be acquired from other people. Henri Nouwen, in his book *Intimacy*, comments about *the priest who had given away so much of himself, he created an inexhaustible need to be constantly with others in order to feel that he was a whole person.*

This is not what God intends. We must learn our limitations. We can receive life from our parents, but we cannot return their lives. We can share life with our spouses and friends, but we cannot change their lives. We can give life to our children but we cannot live their lives for them.

When we try to do so, we deprive them the opportunity to live their own lives. We can love and support each other and even offer advice. We can pray for and persevere with those we love. We can be faithful and generous in our giving. We can be fair and compassionate to those in need. However, we must learn our limitations in terms of what we can give to other people.

Each of us is responsible for tending our own lamp and holding onto an extra flask, so that by trimming the wick our light can burn brighter during times of joy and by tapping into our reservoir our light can sustain us during times of darkness.

This means I make my own choices. I confront my own challenges. I reach for my own goals, and, most importantly, I stand before my Maker and account for my life. The wise bridesmaids realized this and made no apologies for being judicious, ready, and prepared.

According to Matthew, the absence of oil 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.

Today we gather at the Lord's table – we come together as a community of faith and as individuals. We sit with our Lord at this table to partake of *the kingdom of heaven* and to find nourishment until we gather for the final banquet, the wedding feast!

The minister breaks the bread. If we were not in a pandemic, the elders would serve the bread, and those sitting next to us in the pews would pass the bread to us. Yet, ultimately each one of us must partake of the bread of life for ourselves.

Take and eat, believing, affirming, and tending to God's light in your life. Let us keep our lamps trimmed and burning. Halleluiah! Amen.