

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

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32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

¹Then 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. ²And 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. ^{3a}Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

¹⁴"Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵Now 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."

¹⁶Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷for 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. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

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

Matthew 25:1-13

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

"Tending God's Light"

Story One –Part One

It dates me I know. But I remember well the time when the telephone—and each household had only one—the telephone sat on a telephone table. I also recall that entertainment for children did not include texting, video games, remote controlled anything, or shopping malls. Such was not on the list.

We had to come up with our own forms of entertainment. This time of year there we piles of leaves. When was the last time you racked together a pile of leaves solely for the purpose of jumping in them? Perhaps we should. There was also the clothesline. We were familiar with it as a utilitarian item. Not only were we accustomed to retrieving dry clothes from the line, but we know also the form and order to which wet clothes were hung out.

That clothesline was also a form of entertainment. Throw a blanket across the lines, allowing it to hang over and down, and tada—you have it an instant tent. It was the perfect attraction for you, your bothers, and all the neighborhood children.

Of course, I speak from personal experience here. The tent was a neighborhood attraction. Kids, toys, lawn furniture, dogs, all of it under the tent. When lunch time came, my mother always provided it outside—picnic style. Most of the neighborhood kids went home to have their own lunch. Gwen and Sally and Jimmy—the sisters and brother from up the street always stayed.

They never asked to say. My mother never chased them away. She always came fully stocked with summer sausage sandwiches for all. There was milk to drink. She always insisted on drinking milk. And we always had it when those kids up the street were there for our picnic lunches.

We drank milk until the carton was empty. We ate our fill of sandwiches until the white butcher paper was empty.

Story Two – Part One

This is one of those wonderful old stories the Jesus tells. And in many regards you cannot grasp the meaning of this story without also reading and considering the other ones that are told around this one. Suffice it to say, without going into the history of weddings in the ancient world, that these ten bridesmaids were waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. In the tradition, the groom would have retrieved the bride from her parental home and would be on his way bringing her to his house.

It was that arrival that the bridesmaids were awaiting. Their oil lamps lit up the night and lit the way. The wicks on those lamps had to be trimmed just so in order for them to burn optimally without making smoke. As the hour of arrival commenced, the 5 wise bridesmaids took their oil and filled their lamps ready for the night's activity.

At the same time the 5 foolish bridesmaids realized that they did not have enough oil. Their lamps would not burn for the duration of the entire arrival ceremony. To this realization they beg oil from the other 5. Those wise ones turn them away and tell them “No” and that they had better go buy from the dealers what they need for the ritual. Of course, while they are away the arrival of the bridegroom comes and the 5 foolish bridesmaids miss the whole event.

This parable is usually interpreted in terms of preparation for the kingdom. What does it mean to be prepared for the kingdom? 5 were prepared and 5 were not prepared.

Story Three – Part One

Joshua. Joshua gathers all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and he summons all the leadership to present themselves before God. Then Joshua speaks. And it is one of those defining moments when he recalls the history of how they have arrived at this moment.

Then he makes it clear for them that they are to be servants of the Lord. All false gods, etc., are to be put away. The pagan theologies of the land that they encountered—they are to shed those and pledge their allegiance to the Lord who delivered them from Egypt into this land of promise. Then Joshua makes it clear that as for him and his household, “we will serve the Lord.”

The people then respond to Joshua’s call to faithfulness and fidelity to the Lord. And their response is that they too will serve the Lord. They say, “far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods....we will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”

So here is how this exchange goes. Joshua proclaims his intention to serve the Lord. Joshua calls on the people to proclaim their intention to serve the Lord. The people proclaim their intention to serve the Lord.

In response to that we would expect that Joshua would say—“well done, good choice. Yes. Congratulations.” But that is not the response Joshua offers. Instead he says, “You cannot do it.”

Story Four – Part One

Stewardship. Look out. You know stewardship season at church—you know about when it comes on the calendar. You expect that you will get one of those pledge cards in the mail and that we will nag you for money in order to fulfill the church budget.

We are accustomed to thinking about money from a business perspective. The money you put in the plate goes to support the work of the church. So some of it goes to pay for the electric bill, some of it buys paper on which bulletins are printed, some of it pays the staff, and some of it pays the mission obligations that enable us to be involved in world mission through the Presbyterian Church USA.

And that is about as far as we think about it.

We have come to regard the money we put in the offering plate as money that goes to pay the church bills. So, when stewardship season comes around—hey its time to put up and toss in our gifts in order that we have enough to pay the church bills.

But, there’s something missing in that.

What’s missing is the spiritual reality. This is not a check book exercise.

Whose church is this? Is it your church? Is it my church? Is it the presbytery's church? No. That is where I love that statement in our Presbyterian Book of Order where it says that all property is held in trust for Jesus Christ.

This building—it belongs to Jesus Christ. This ministry that we participate in—it belongs to Jesus Christ. This ministry plan that we are attempting to learn how to live into—it belongs to Jesus Church. Our newly defined principles and purpose—"Changing lives and growing in God's Love"—that belongs to Jesus Christ.

Story One – Part Two

It was not until my adolescence that I came to realize that my mother purposely provided those picnic lunches that included meat sandwiches and milk. It was not until my adolescence that I realized those three neighborhood children did not have someone looking out to see that they got a healthy dose of good food containing calcium and protein.

Once I realized that, I realized my mother was doing a good thing in sharing all that we had with the neighborhood kids.

It was a few years after that realization that I realized the cost of those picnics for the neighborhood kid lunches. It was as I was growing into manhood that I came to realize my mother was providing that at great cost to herself and her own. There were not spare cartons of milk at our house. I didn't know that because it was always there.

At the super table we boys got the finer cuts of meat, while Mom and Dad took what was left. We boys got the new shoes, while my parents kept polishing up the old ones. My parents only went out without us children once a year. November 9th-their anniversary. As it turns out—

they spent that evening buying our Christmas presents. We did not receive an allowance, but on Sunday mornings Dad would give each of us two quarters to put in the offering plate in Sunday School.

I'm proud of how I grew up. I'm proud of my parents. They sacrificed, they spent it all...for our benefit. It was love in the flesh.

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Story Two – Part Two

5 were prepared and 5 were not prepared. Another lens through which this story can be interpreted is expectation over preparation. 5 were expecting of the kingdom and 5 were not. It speaks well of our station in life. We may be prepared for the kingdom of God, but the reality of it is that we have little expectation of the arrival of the kingdom of God.

It is this issue of expectation upon which I think the story hinges. I think it goes deeper than the 5 bridesmaids merely not having enough oil for the night event. I think they were missing it. I think they were missing that this was a really big moment—this was a moment that would not come again.

Instead of being ready, expectant, and fully equipped, the real travesty is they were cavalier about it all. It was not until they were trimming of the lamp's wicks that they realized they were short on fuel. They were casual about the whole thing. They should have been anticipating what was going on and what was going to happen.

I wonder, I wonder if they were so cavalier about what was happening that they did not even consider bringing their whole stock of oil from home. I wonder if they thought at all about it.

The real travesty was that this was a really big moment and they were checked out when they should have been checked in. As I read this parable, that is the issues—being checked into or out of the reality of the moment to which we have arrived.

Are we checked in to the reality of the moment? Are we checked into the reality that God is calling us put forward our expectation and our preparation to this moment of discipleship? Are we checked into the reality that if we are holding back our oil at home rather than pouring it into our lamps and getting out there in the world where the action is...oh are we checked in enough to realize that we can be missing the wonder of this big moment in our life in God.

Story Three – Part Two

There ends up being this back and forth response that takes place.

Serve the Lord.

Yes we will.

No you can't.

Yes we will.

No you can't do it.

Strange. Sure. But true. Joshua is trying to get them to acknowledge the truth that we have to face. That while our intentions might be right clear, oh, our actions are often another issue altogether. Indeed, our actions betray us.

It is true. "Serve the Lord, and serve only the Lord." "The Lord your God is holy." And as we attempt to live up to the standards of that one

holy One, oh we will fall short. We will. And get it clear that God chooses us in spite of that. God does not choose a relationship with us because we are perfect. God chooses a relationship with us because God loves us.

God wants us to respond to that love by giving ourselves and our lives to being in relationship with God. But let us get clear on what Joshua was clear on. We can choose to serve the Lord—but the real action. The real action is on God’s part. God chooses us.

That is what we see most clearly in the cross—we see in it the life and death and resurrection of Christ. We see that God chooses us completely. What response can there be to that. “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Story Four – Part Two

All of it belongs to Jesus Christ. All of it!

But “it” starts here. At the baptismal font—here is where it all begins. And here is what it is all about. Here, at the baptismal font, is where we acknowledge that it all belongs to Jesus Christ—and when I say “it all” I mean you and me. We belong to Jesus Christ.

Body, soul, spirit, gifts, money, talents, everything that we are—the whole package—we belong to Jesus Christ.

We belong—as in ownership—okay, but more so as in home. There is no other place for us but in Jesus Christ. We belong. In him is where we belong.

And as such—we give...not to pay bills or to look good. But we give because we belong to him—we are his body. And he gives. “This is my

body broken for you...take eat.” And so we give. We give our last carton of milk and make sandwiches for the neighborhood.

We belong to Jesus Christ—and so we give—we bring the whole stock, the whole supply of oil—we bring it all to the feast and we tend the light. We let that light shine. We are the tender’s God’s light.

We belong to Jesus Christ—there is not another moment like this—God is not calling us to watch or to wait. God is calling us to this moment where we will be the very ones who “Change lives and grow in God’s love.”

All of it—all of it belongs to Jesus Christ. All of us—each and all and every part of us belongs to Jesus Christ. This is a spiritual moment—not just today, and not just what you put on card or in the offering plate. This is a spiritual moment—and realize that in all of it—in everything you do...your call is to serve the Lord...to tend the light.

We belong to Jesus Christ—as for us—we will serve the Lord. Amen.