

“YOU HAVE CHOSEN . . . WISELY”

**a sermon on Joshua 24:1-3a, 14, 15; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13
November 12, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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Today’s lectionary texts are about decisions. All of us are, by necessity, decision-makers. We are regularly confronted with choices in our personal lives, in our families, in our work, in our leisure.

Because of our differences in personality characteristics, we humans approach decision-making differently – some of us valuing logic, others intuition, others relationships.

But we all make decisions, and therefore we should all understand that every decision we make has consequences. Good decisions have positive consequences. Bad decisions have negative consequences. And in the real world, most important decisions we make are a *mix* of positive and negative consequences, which is why decisions can sometimes be perplexing, and exceedingly difficult.

A decision to watch a movie with our family, for instance, has the positive consequence of building family relationships. But it may also have the consequence of leaving chores or some other important work undone. The good consequences of a particular course of action might well offset the bad. Or then again, they might not. So we learn to “weigh the consequences,” and decide.

Our lessons are about a certain *kind* of decisions - decisions related to the practice of our faith. Faith decisions are exceedingly important, with very significant consequences.

But at the same time, I would contend that there is a “faith dimension” to *many* of our decisions in life – more than we would probably want to admit. Being faithful, in the final analysis, is not just about making a one-time decision to follow God. It is about adopting a way of life that keeps our relationship to God active, and *progressing*. And it is about engaging in the work God is calling us to do (or not!).

The story of the wise and foolish maidens is one of Jesus’ better known parables, despite the fact that it involves customs and practices that are *exceedingly* foreign to us. Jesus’ parables took common stories and situations from everyday life in *his* place and time, and applied them to spiritual matters. The everyday life

stories were supposed to be what we might call “no-brainers.” Of *course* the master would not be pleased with the servant who took his talents and buried them in the dirt. Of *course* it is risky to build your house on sand. Of *course* the seeds thrown into the rocks will not grow as well as the ones thrown into fertile soil.

And in the case of the maidens, of *course* it is wise to be prepared with plenty of oil for your lamps when you play the game that was (apparently) an old custom in those days of trying to *sneak* into your wedding banquet in the middle of the night without being noticed.

The first (and probably most important) piece of advice to keep in mind about making decisions – both in matters of the faith and otherwise – is, don’t overlook the obvious. We always try to make matters more difficult and complex than they really are.

So, Jesus was making a very simple and clear point. Anybody knows that it is wise to be prepared. And anyone who decides not to make adequate preparations for a known future occurrence is a fool, and must face the consequences of their laziness, or procrastination.

But let’s also look at the text from Joshua. This comes from the time *after* the Exodus, and the years of “wandering,” when the Israelites are literally *on the verge* of entering the promised land and inheriting God’s promises. Notice the choices that Joshua lays before the people. They are undoubtedly the choices with which the people were struggling, and I would argue that they represent the kinds of choices with which you and I are typically faced in many of our daily decisions, even though these days we at least *profess* to be thoroughly monotheistic in our beliefs.

“If you be unwilling to serve Yahweh,” Joshua told the Israelites – as they stood and looked out over the land that God had promised them, “choose this day whom you *will* serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you [now] dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh.”

Those two “alternate options” represent the two extremes of choice with which you and I are always faced. On the one hand, we can choose to serve the gods of our ancestors. We can live in the past. Glorify it, even when it has no relevance, or impact any more. Living in the past is comfortable, because it is a “known entity.” But it lacks progress. God had plans for Israel. Molten calves stood in the way of those plans.

On the other hand, we constantly face what I would call the “allure of the immediate,” which is what I would suggest the option of choosing to serve the gods of the Amorites represents. It is always easy, after all, to “follow the trends.” Just “go with the flow.” Do what everyone *else* is doing. After all, it seems to be working for them. . .

“We are in *this* land now,” the logic went. “So we must now serve *this* land’s gods.” It has a certain logic to it. But it isn’t the life of *faith*. That choice, in our day, would probably mean to choose no faith at all – live fully in the “secular world.”

The life of faith, I would argue, is somewhere *between* those two extremes, and also somewhere *beyond* them – neither clinging to the past, nor venerating the present, but appealing instead to a “higher standard.”

It was Yahweh, Joshua reminded the people, who had done great and mighty things in their midst, and who gave them their communal life through the covenant and the law.

When we face difficult decisions and need guidance, in other words, it isn’t enough to ask what would have worked in the past, although the past can be a valuable teacher and a guide. It also isn’t adequate to look around and see what everyone else is doing – because everyone else just might be wrong! And even success isn’t necessarily the goal toward which we strive. As I often put it in dealing with church leaders, our job is faithfulness. *God’s* job is success.

Doing what is good and right. That should be our goal. Not doing what is popular or necessarily what will be successful. And not simply doing what we’ve always done – although not rejecting the ways of the past simply because they are no longer “in style,” either.

Instead, looking inward, to the depth of our being and the Source of our strength, to something that is not just within us, but *Greater* than us, and beyond us, and asking not just what “benefits” us personally, but what serves the cause the kingdom, and benefits everyone.

To the Israelites who took Joshua’s words to heart, who looked within themselves, and considered the events of the Exodus and the conquest, the answer was clear. Yahweh was the One to serve, the One to worship, the One to love. And even if it meant personal sacrifice, the right thing to do was to follow him. Serve him. Fulfill the ancient promise.

And so too with us, with our families, and our churches. In every decision we face, there are at least three options:

We can do what we have always done in the past.

Or we can do what the forces and pressures of the culture dictate.

Or, we can ask what faithfulness to the God we serve demands – to the God whose fullness dwells in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

In a sense, the first two options are the easy ones. Figuring out the path of faithfulness to *our* God – the Creator of the universe, the God of both justice *and* mercy, the God of Grace *and* works, the God of *eternity*, is more difficult.

But I would contend that faithfulness lies in the tension between past and present, grace and law, mercy and works.

I pray that God will be with our nation's leaders in the days ahead, as they make decisions that impact virtually every person on our planet, and with our denomination, as it works to define who we are *now*, in light of decisions we have reached in recent years on matters that have divided us for decades, and with the congregations of our presbytery as they contemplate decisions about mission priorities, and the faithful use of their limited resources.

“Choose this day who you will serve. . . but as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh, the Lord.”

Not the gods of the past. Not the gods of the present. But God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. No matter what.

May we be faithful to our God in every decision we make.

And to God be the glory.