

It's Complicated—a sermon on Joshua 24:1-25 and Matthew 25:1-13, Year A, Proper 27
Austin Crenshaw Shelley, The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, November 12, 2017

When I was in college, I attended a Methodist church near the campus of my all-women's university. Week after week, the pastor there would begin his welcome and announcement time by saying, "You could have chosen to be anywhere this morning. You have chosen to be here, and we are thankful." Life is full of choices. We choose what to eat, which clothing to wear. We choose how we will spend our time, how we will allocate our money. Depending on our stage of life, we choose the colors we will use to draw a preschool masterpiece, which car to drive, which college to attend, which course of study to follow, which career path to pursue. Some of us choose the career path more than once. We may choose a spouse—or they choose us—or perhaps we choose a companion of the canine or feline variety instead, a safer choice as they are more devoted than any human. As much as any of these things is in our control, we choose when and how and whether to marry or to divorce, when and how to become parents, when and how to buy a home or to move from the home we've known into an assisted living community. Every day we choose. And the choices seem complicated. Complex. High stakes. After all, we all make choices—some life-giving, some fatal—but most of them falling somewhere in a gray area of neither good nor bad, just necessary. On the one hand we choose from an embarrassment of riches: 50 varieties of cereal, ten different varieties of apples. But more importantly, we choose how to interact with the people we love and how to interact with the people we would rather not be commanded to love. We choose how we will respond to events happening around us. We choose, for instance, how we will respond to the commonality of pervasive sexual harassment, or how we will react to the news of another deadly mass shooting, this time in a church service in Sutherland Springs, Texas. How will we respond to the fear we feel when we consider that it could happen here, too? Each of you could have chosen to be anywhere this morning. You have chosen to be here, and we are thankful.

There are more than 26 people in the pews I've marked with caution tape, but the proportion is about right, given the size of our congregation compared to that of First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs. Surely you have heard by now that 26 people were killed one week ago today in that church, and another 20 were injured when a person carrying an AR-15, an automatic rifle, walked up and down the center aisle, systematically shooting people, pausing only momentarily to reload his weapon. Many of you heard this devastating news when you chose to attend the powerful concert that was the last of three events in our Festival of Music and Arts last weekend—a weekend devoted to ending gun violence in Philadelphia and beyond. I did not hear about this tragedy until I returned home late Sunday night from preaching at a colleague's installation service in New York City, but I haven't stopped thinking about it since. I can tell you that what happened at Sutherland Springs is a pastor's nightmare. A sanctuary is supposed to be a safe place—that's why we call it a sanctuary. The people of Sutherland Springs could have chosen to be anywhere last Sunday morning. They chose to go to church, and I can't say I'm thankful. I wish that by some freak of probability, every last one of them had chosen to stay home. But they didn't, and the choice made by the gunman to walk into their sanctuary, their safe space, firing an AR-15 proved to be fatal for more than a quarter of the congregation.

All the pastors I know are playing out the scenarios in our heads: what would happen if this tragedy struck our own beloved people in our own beloved sanctuary? And we have a choice to make, one that seems complicated: we can fixate on our own security and safety, or we can choose to serve God rather than serving fear. You could have chosen to be anywhere this morning. You have chosen to be here. I suppose that's step one. And we are thankful.

The act of making a similar choice is what ties today's two Bible readings together. Both the Israelites who newly inhabit the promised land and the wise and foolish bridesmaids awaiting the wedding banquet in Matthew's gospel are presented with a choice.

"Choose this day whom you will serve," says Joshua to the Israelites who newly inhabit the promised land of Canaan, "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." The choice Joshua gives to the Israelites seems complicated. There are many viable options, after all. There are the gods of the ancestors—the ones that the wayward Israelites served back before crossing the Jordan. And there are the gods of the Amorites—also called Canaanites—the people group that the Israelites were nearly successful at exterminating through genocide. And then there's the Lord. At least three viable "choices." At least, that's what Joshua seems to be saying until we read the portion of the text that the lectionary omitted. The lectionary for this week left out an entire chunk of Joshua 24, a chunk immediately followed by the word, "therefore." A therefore in scripture is like a flashing neon sign begging us to pay attention, not only to what comes next, but also to what came before. A therefore means there's a story behind whatever God is asking of us. So I chose to restore that chunk of Joshua 24 to our reading today. It made for a longer than usual scripture passage, but I have no regrets. Because just before Joshua issues his famous mandate for the people to choose whom they will serve, he gives

them a reminder of their history with the God who brought them out of Egypt, who led them in the wilderness, who destroyed other groups of people along the way so that the Israelites could inhabit a promised land that had not belonged to them. Joshua reminds the people that it was this God who felled their enemies, who “gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.” Make no mistake, when Joshua sets these choices before the people, it’s a little bit like when I only have time and energy to cook a simple meal, so I give my children the “choice” of having spaghetti or worms for dinner. Technically, they still have a choice. But no Shelley kid to date has chosen worms. So Joshua sets a choice before the Israelites: would you like to worship the gods of the people who enslaved you in Egypt, the people God plagued and drowned in the Red Sea? How about the people whom God destroyed in order to give you their land? No? Well, ok then: the God who has been with you and for you all along is really the only choice. No wonder the people insist they will serve the Lord! Nobody chooses worms over spaghetti. The choice isn’t as complicated as we might have originally thought.

Move with me now to Jesus’ parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. This parable has always irritated me. Here it seems that the same Jesus who just a few verses later will say, “for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me”—this same Jesus is commending as *wise* the bridesmaids who would not share of their own resources. How can the Jesus who teaches us to give sacrificially by his own ultimate example call these hoarders wise? “No! There will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go the dealers and buy some for yourselves.” This is a horrible parable for stewardship season. The so-called wise bridesmaids refuse to give of their own abundance because they fear there won’t be enough to go around. And isn’t that the choice we all face when we are filling out our pledge cards or choosing to which ministries of the church we will devote our finite amount of time and energy? What if there’s not enough to go around? Maybe those who are more foolish than we are, who don’t know how to handle money properly or how to use their time or energy efficiently should figure it out for themselves. These choices are so complicated, after all.

Or are they? I completely rewrote this sermon last night because I began to wonder if the thing that made the foolish bridesmaids foolish wasn’t that they didn’t bring enough oil along, but rather that they thought the oil was the most important thing—more important than being present to welcome the bridegroom and to celebrate with him. They were focused on the stuff that made the lamps work, not the light that would have been enough for them, too. Surely one lantern would have provided enough light for every two bridesmaids, right? The choice the parable gives us seems complicated. And yet, the choice set before us is pretty straightforward. Do we want to be wise or foolish? Spaghetti or worms? Of the two choices, only one is commendable. When the foolish bridesmaids return, they have plenty of oil but no way to enter the banquet. Clearly having oil doesn’t transform them into wise bridesmaids. The oil is useless without the celebration. They were foolish for leaving. They were foolish to think that what gave them value was what they had instead of who they were. Where in our lives are we off chasing more oil when our presence and attention are of utmost importance?

Let me circle back around to the place where we began. I think we’re chasing more oil when we spend more time obsessing about how we might protect ourselves from disaster rather than working to end the loopholes in our laws that allow these disasters to persist, time and time again, among all people. I think we’re chasing more oil when we choose to hoard more than we need because we’re more concerned with having a cushion than with the reality that not everyone has enough. I think we are chasing more oil when we explain away these choices as complicated rather than realizing that we’re choosing to eat worms.

It’s easy to compartmentalize, to think that how we spend our money, our time, our energy, and our devotion has nothing to do with our lives of faith. We think that we can hold the spiritual things in one hand and cling tightly to our finite resources in the other. But it doesn’t work that way. Cindy reminded me this week to preach a stewardship sermon—not a social justice sermon, but I think the two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I’m not sure how to do the one without the other. To be fair, as an associate pastor, I don’t have to worry so much about the money it takes to keep this place going, or the money we need to pay our staff a livable wage, to cover the rising costs of healthcare, to feed the hungry, to visit the sick, to provide drinking water where none exists, to care for those who are imprisoned—both literally in prisons and figuratively imprisoned by diseases or addictions or abuses or fears or dangers. I don’t worry about the money—at least not as much as Cindy is forced to—but I do worry about your hearts. I worry that you’re eating worms when you could have spaghetti—gourmet spaghetti, even. I worry that you’re chasing useless oil when you could be sharing the light, enjoying the banquet, celebrating the reality that the God who made you and loves you desires your presence and attention in all things—in how you assuage your fear, in how you allocate your resources, in how you choose this day whom you will serve. Here’s a secret: it’s not that complicated. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.