

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
March 19, 2023 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: Matthew 25:1-13

Sermon: Just say no (Lent 4)

A ministry colleague of mine who serves in university chaplaincy told the story of holding a prayer service one night during Lent, and then afterwards serving the students who had attended cookies and hot chocolate. As he went around with the pot pouring hot chocolate, he had two or three students who said: “no thanks, I gave up chocolate for lent – I’m, like, totally addicted.” One of them said “It’s actually a lot harder than I thought it would be, I guess I can’t live without it.” Others talked about giving up coffee or watching a particular youtuber or getting up early every morning instead of sleeping in.

On the one hand, my colleague said, learning about the value of any spiritual practice or tradition is always a good thing. But on the other hand, he reflected, I guess I need to say more about the season of Lent and how it is so much deeper than using that time just to break a bad habit.

We celebrate Shrove Tuesday with pancakes, syrup, butter and sausages the day before Ash Wednesday because our forebears in faith literally gave up eating all eggs and butter and meat for the whole season of Lent (except on Sundays when they had a little reprieve.) No matter how hard it is to give up chocolate (and believe me I’ve tried it!) or social media or sleeping in, many religious leaders today are reminding us that Lent is not just about giving up something that is a luxury, unless it really contributes to a world that is changed, or a life transformed.

In the fourth century, the early Christian leader John Chrysostom wrote: *“No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. So, no matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great.”*

I’m not criticizing those who give something up or add something to their weekly routine during Lent, this is something I myself have practiced as a way of strengthening my own spiritual resolve for saying “no.” No to the clutter in my closet or on my desk, no to the foods that I crave but that really do not satisfy me, no to the social media that eats up so much of my time, time better spent elsewhere. But even while I might practice giving something up for Lent, I try to remember that the world’s injustices and my own personal transformation will require so much more than just giving up chocolate, and that it will take much longer than 40 days. I need to remember that this practice is symbolic, and then use the learning from my success (or failure) to empower and inspire much more meaningful change in the long term.

Today we heard the parable of the bridesmaids, as it is usually called, from the gospel of Matthew. We have been working our way through some of difficult parables that were told by Matthew, as a way of explaining what Jesus taught his followers about the Kingdom of God. It was not an easy way, to follow Jesus. It required tough choices over and over again.

So this week we find ourselves reading the parable of the bridesmaids. And I guess I have been watching too much television, because the image in my head is right out of the Bachelor that reality TV show, where a potential bridegroom meets, then tests and rejects numerous young women, until finally the perfect match is found, and they live happily ever after (or not, according to the tabloids.)

Even before watching the Bachelor, I have always had a bit of trouble with this parable – in part because of the gender stereotyping that comes with our image of the bridesmaids.

In ancient Palestine, young women from the bride's household were sent out some distance to wait for the bridegroom. Then when he arrived, they would escort the bride and groom to the groom's house where the couple would be married. It was young women were sent to watch because they were the least important in the household, and the most expendable. They were likely female servants or farm workers, not the bride's sisters and cousins. They weren't chosen because they would look good in that particular colour of pink. They were chosen because they might not make it back.

The other part of the parable that always catches me is the part where the ones who did not bring extra oil to burn plead with their companions to share that extra oil, so that all might accompany the bride and groom to their wedding.

And the first group of women reply "No. We will not share, or else there might not be enough. Go buy yourself some more oil if you want a piece of this action."

This is a good parable for all of us who have trouble saying "no" to hear. Because two weeks ago I preached about the employer whose priority, like God's, was sharing and generosity and making sure everyone had enough. Then this week Jesus puts forward the story of some women who wisely and faithfully knew when it was time to say No.

And that isn't easy for some of us to hear, the ones who have trouble saying no. We have trouble saying no even when we know it is for the best, or that the request is unreasonable.

We have trouble saying No

- because it might make us look like we are not nice,
- because it might break a relationship we value or
- because we live in a culture of toxic positivity, where no one wants to be dragged down by negative thinking.

And yet sometimes, according to Jesus, the most faithful, caring, appropriate thing to do is to say no.

No, there isn't enough for everyone.

No you won't be able to attend the banquet.

No there isn't time to go back.

No rose for you, not tonight.

Like giving up something for Lent, this parable reminds us that sometimes it is even faithful to say no.

One of my favourite podcasts took a good look at Ash Wednesday and said that Lent is our season to look at the world a whole new way. Maybe it's a time when we look at the world as our partner in creation. Maybe it's a time when we look at our neighbours as beloved children of God. Or maybe, she said, it's a time when we tell ourselves it's okay not to be a doormat. To flex our saying no muscles, not in an aggressive way, but in an assertive way. Saying "no" in order to protect something we truly love.

Matthew has placed this parable towards the end of the gospel, which means that for us it falls in the midst of our Lenten journey. It is part of this series of classic parables that represent some tough choices ahead for Jesus' listeners. Perhaps Matthew is foreshadowing the difficult road that follows, the path to Jerusalem and then to the cross on Calvary. It is a path that stretched the courage of the disciples and friends of Jesus far beyond their current understanding. You can almost imagine them saying "wait... is this what you meant when you called me to follow you?"

The final line of the parable admonishes the listener to "stay awake" which doesn't really make sense since all 10 of the women fell asleep. The failure of the five who were left behind actually was that they did not understand what a long haul their task might be, that there might be an unexpected delay and that, whatever the circumstances, they needed to be prepared to pay the cost for extra fuel.

Liz Milner, a prison chaplain, suggests that maybe what the five foolish bridesmaids needed to do was not run to the nearest store, but to pluck up their courage to face a long time waiting in the darkness to mark the arrival of the groom. Even if their lights had gone out, would waiting in the darkness, even travelling in the darkness to the groom's house, wouldn't that have been a more courageous response than running away? It is hard to wait in the darkness, when your resources are running low, but maybe at this stage of Jesus' journey, having hope in unspeakable time is what Jesus calls wisdom and preparation.

We need to remember that Jesus was raised in the Jewish tradition where the heroes and heroines were always imperfect, they were flawed, foolish and yet somehow faithful servants of God's way. And God listened to them. We are reminded of Jacob wrestling with God on his journey of faith, Moses arguing with God to save the people after they have been unfaithful, Hagar reminding God with her tears that Ishamel is Abraham's son too.

Maybe the women's fault lay in seeking a quick fix, instead of confronting their lack of faith head on. After all, Jesus' stories seem to raise up those who dare to ask him questions, push his boundaries, and surprise him into acceptance.

What does it mean for us, when we give and give and give, and let our lamps burn out? What does it mean for us to avoid saying No, even to the point when we ourselves have nothing to give?

We are all beloved children of God. From God we have learned what it means to be welcomed and welcoming, generous with our invitation and yet wise with our No's.

May we find Christ's eternal light to guide us in the path ahead, even when our resources are low or the way ahead seems full of shadows and doubt – may we always have hope in Christ's faithfulness to us, we will not be left behind, Amen.