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All Saints

## ***“The Stewardship of the Saints”***

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

Text: “. . . choose this day whom you will serve, . . .” . . . Joshua 24:15b

Sometimes it is helpful to be certain about the terms we are using; and for clergy especially about the terms used in a sermon title. For some reason we have a tendency to be sticklers on theological discourse. Therefore only sometimes is it helpful to use the dictionary to define those terms. For example the dictionary is very helpful with the definitions of Stewards and Stewardship.

**Stewardship:** to act as a steward. **Steward:** 1. a person put in charge of the affairs of a large household or estate; 2. one who acts as a supervisor or administrator, as of finances and property, for another or others.

However, the dictionary took four definitions before it nailed what we believers of the New Testament would use to define as saint.

**Saint:** 1. a holy person; 2. a person who is exceptionally meek, charitable, patient, etc. 3. those, esp. holy persons, who have died and are believed to with God; 4. in the New Testament, any Christian.

You see, one of the preeminent beliefs of Christians, especially protestant Christians is that all Christian believers are saints of the church. And on a day we observe as All Saints Day, it is important to know what we are discussing.

What does it mean to be a Christian believer? We gain great insight from the declaration made in the book of Joshua by Joshua as he asked the leaders of the tribes of Israel to rededicate themselves to the one true God, the God of Abraham and Moses, the God of the Exodus.

Listen as Joshua addresses the tribes of Israel. First he reminds them of the heritage:

***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. 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. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.***

Then Joshua asks them to renew their covenant with God.

***Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve God in sincerity and faithfulness; put away the gods that Your ancestors served beyond***

***the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 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.***

***Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for 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. God protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and 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."***

But Joshua remembered what Moses had gone through during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness of the desert Sinai: how they had questioned Moses' leadership, how they had made false Gods including a golden calf. So Joshua continues:

***But 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. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good." And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the LORD!" Then 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." He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel." The people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and Him we will obey." So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.***

To better understand this it is important to note some over-riding beliefs running throughout the whole book of Joshua. While it is the book of the conquest of the holy land, then known as Canaan, the conquest is understood as an act of justice. The conquest takes the land from city-states ruled by very wealthy and very oppressive tyrants, and then is divided among the twelve tribes of Israel. Joshua's call to fidelity is most important, because their faith and allegiance to God is what defines the people of God, not ethnicity not race. Thus the first person to become a member of the people of God during this conquest is a woman, a marginalized woman, and a prostitute at that – Rahab – because her faith saved the spies of Israel. And the first person to receive a portion of the land is a foreigner – Caleb.

The grace of the Lord exhibited in the Book of Joshua is seen in the giving of the land – but not as private property, not as a commercial transaction; but rather as a gift of stewardship. They must follow God's will and act justly as good stewards of God's gift to them. If the tribes of Israel remain faithful to God and act justly over the governance

of the land, their stewardship of the land is upheld, if not Israel loses the land; or worse, like as happened to the other city states, they will be destroyed.

Hence it is important to hear clearly and unequivocally, “choose this day whom you will serve; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Choosing God isn't the hard part. God offers grace and to the tribes of Israel, God also offered land. When being a Christian seems to have nothing but benefits, the choice is easy. But being a Christian also has some implications that aren't so easy. Norman Cousins phrased it well: “Wisdom consists of the anticipation of consequences.”

And Jesus speaks to His disciples and followers about how to be disciples – stewards of God's gift of grace and justice – in the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. It's the story we all need to hear, because it tells us to be prepared.

But first a story. Fred Park of Berea, Kentucky tells a story about a man named Quill. Quill lived way back in the woods where he hunted and fished all the time. Quill didn't pay any attention to the hunting seasons or laws or anything, and he knew the woods better than the game warden.

The game warden had been trying to catch Quill for a long time. Today was the day. He knew Quill would be up early to go fishing. So the game warden sneaked down there in the middle of the night and hid on top of Quill's house. This way he knew he had the jump on Quill. He'd let him head out and then he'd follow him. His plan was to hide in the woods until Quill had caught a large, illegal bunch of fish, and he'd catch him.

As it started to get a little bit of daylight, the game warden could hear Quill get up, start a fire, and put the coffee on. His stomach started growling at the smell of that coffee and those fresh smelling biscuits as they baked in the oven. He could hardly contain himself. Suddenly out walked Quill on the porch and hollered, “Come on down here and git some of this coffee and biscuits while they're hot! I know you're out there!” He went back in and shut the door.

The game warden could not believe it. He climbed down and walked up on the porch and into the house and exclaimed, “Well, how did you know I was out there?”

Quill said, “I didn't. I walk out there and say that every morning, just in case ye are!” Quill may not have been a genius, but he knew enough to take precautions. He was ready!

The parable of the Ten Bridesmaids is a parable of stewardship and preparedness.

In the New Testament times weddings were a huge deal! And in the day without technology or even a dependable watch, being prepared was important. And like weddings in our time there are certain customs – like closing the door to keep out evil spirits.

Everyone in the wedding party had a function. It is the function of the bridesmaids to light the banquet and give it its festiveness. So when the bridegroom comes the lamps are lit to provide light for the celebration. All the bridesmaids had oil in their lamps, but five of them were prepared with extra oil – for the celebration could go on for a full week! If the bridesmaids shared their oil with the bridesmaids who were unprepared all the lights would go out far before the festivities were over. The only option was to send them out to get their own extra oil and hope they got back before the doors were shut.

Of course they didn't make it back in time, and the so-called foolish maidens found the doors to the celebration were shut to them. It's all about preparedness.

In 1976, Indiana University's basketball team was undefeated throughout the regular season and captured the NCAA National Championship. Controversial and colorful coach Bobby Knight led them to that championship. Shortly afterwards, Coach Knight was interviewed on the television show "60 Minutes." The commentator asked him, "Why is it, Bobby, that your basketball teams at Indiana are always so successful? Is it the will to succeed?"

"The will to succeed is important," replied Bobby Knight, "but I'll tell you what's more important – it's the will to prepare. It's the will to go out there every day training and building those muscles and sharpening those skills!"

Norman Cousins talks about preparedness when he states that "wisdom consists of the anticipation of consequences."

This morning we honor and remember those saints of the church who have gone before us to form, in the words of the author of Hebrews, "a great cloud of witnesses". They have paved a way for us, being stewards of this church and its ministries through our 99 years of ministry. Were they perfect in their witness? Of course not, but in their human form they carried the lineage of Christian discipleship from Abraham and Sarah to David to Esther to Jesus and Paul and down to our present local expression as Chevy Chase United Methodist Church. And now we carry on, not in their shoes, but to be stewards in this new day to welcome and share the Good News of Christ to our neighbors locally and far away.

We are stewards of this land, this building, this expression of faith. And today we will share in the sacrament that celebrates this covenant between – not pastor and people, not people and people, but between God and people. It is the constant reminder of God's gracious and forgiving love that binds us as one – that God so loved the world that God gave His only Son for the future of us as Christians; saints all of us of Christ's church.

As we receive this Sacrament let us resolve to prepare both ourselves and this church for another 100 years of faithful Christian service to each other, to our communities, and to the world.