

THE BENEFITS OF BELONGING

Matthew 25: 1-13; Luke 22: 39-46

“Pray that you do not come into the time of trial” Jesus tells his disciples. Make sure you have extra oil for your lamps because you never know how long you’ll need to keep your lamps lit, the parable teaches...

Life can be wonderful, a joy, fulfilling and happy. But life can also be challenging, difficult and painful. And there are times and seasons of life when life is truly a trial, when we’re pushed to the edge and beyond. There is a line in the Lord’s prayer we recite every Sunday which is especially relevant: “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Temptation is another word for trial. Deliverance from evil is equivalent to deliverance from a time of trial. Jesus is highly aware of what’s happening around him. He will be arrested any time and the greatest trial of his life awaits.

The disciples, on the other hand, are living in denial. In Luke’s account, their denial is attributed to grief. They are so sad at what’s been happening and scared of what may yet happen that they choose to pretend it’s not happening and won’t happen. Denial is a way of coping. Let’s pretend it’s not happening. Focus on happy thoughts. But it takes a lot of psychic energy to live in denial. Living a lie is hard work for the soul. So, they’re exhausted. They sleep. They sleep just like the bridesmaids in the parable. Living a lie is exhausting. But we also know how denial works out as a strategy for living life. You can’t sleep through everything. If you’re not prepared to face real life and if you’re not prepared to face what may be coming, your fall when it does come will be that much worse. Without oil in the lamp of your soul, you will cave in when trouble comes because you’re just not equipped to face it truthfully.

So then, what is it that can give us oil for our lamps so that our light doesn’t go out? What is it that builds up strength in us so that we don’t fall? Or, if we do fall, what is it that gives us the motivation and vision to rise up again and find new meaning and purpose going forward?

In his most recent book, “The Second Mountain,” New York Times best selling author David Brooks writes about commitments. Those who have strong commitments that ground them in their lives develop the kind of strength and light to really thrive in life. Alternatively, those who have weak commitments or the wrong kinds of commitments – commitments to things like ambition, money, power and self-promotion, for example, will never find real inner strength and light. OK preacher, so what kinds of commitments are we talking about?

Let me begin with a story. Thessaloniki is a large city in northern Greece. During the second world war, there was a Jewish community there. One family, the Mordechais, owned a thriving fashion business. One day, a teenage girl came in to their store. She wanted to learn how to be a seamstress so she could make some money to care for her family. She was only a teenager, but she was the eldest of three sisters and the sisters were orphans. Mentos Mordechai's heart went out to the girl. Not only would he take her in and train her, but he would do it for free because she was desperately poor and needed to provide for her sisters. This was before the war started.

Once there was war and Greece was defeated, the Nazis came in and occupied Thessaloniki. And as they did everywhere else they occupied, the Nazis began rounding up Jews to ship them to concentration camps. The three sisters immediately offered to hide the Mordechais, giving them shelter in one of their rooms and sharing their food rations with them. But it didn't take long for the family to be reported to the authorities. The sisters then helped the Mordechais escape and provided them with clothes so they could hide in the mountains. What happened next? Did the Mordechais survive? Did the sisters get in trouble?

Before I continue with the story, let's review what we said about commitments. Our commitments and the right kind of commitments, ground us and equip us with oil to light the lamps of our souls. Our commitments and the right kind of commitments give us the kind of strength to face our times of trial without escape into sleepy denial. Our commitments equip us internally to face our trials, and if and when we do fall, to rise up again and keep growing through them. So what kinds of commitments are we talking about?

There are many worthy commitments in life, especially commitments to people. But commitments to people, even at great cost to ourselves personally, arise from commitments to principles, commitments out of faith and hope, commitments to love, commitments that are like anchors and guides for our souls. And this is exactly what the commitments that form the basis of our membership questions here at Armour Heights are all about.

Each of the four questions involve commitments. And each commitment is preceded by a recognition that without the enabling of the grace of God our commitments will fail at some point. What's the grace of God? Grace means a gift of love. God's grace means the gift of God's love. When we are filled up inside not by fear, stress, social pressure or the need to succeed, but filled up by love, then love is what will power us to keep our commitments. So then, with the enabling of God's grace, which feeds us with divine love, what commitments do we make?

First we commit to a path of growth, that is, inner growth, in renouncing what is wrong and embracing what is right in our lives and in our world. The sisters in our story recognized immediately that what the Nazis were doing to Jews and others was wrong. Their commitment was to embrace what was right even though their very lives would be at risk.

Second, with the enabling of God's grace, we commit to becoming closer followers of Jesus Christ whose Spirit continues to inspire compassionate and healing involvement in the world. Whether the sisters had this sense of identity as followers of Christ in themselves, their actions were a commitment to compassion and healing against hate, torture and murder of innocent human beings who were their friends. They could not give up and abandon them. Where healing compassion is at work, Christ's Spirit is at work.

Third, with the enabling of God's grace, we commit to do battle with injustice and wrong not by retaliating but by letting go hurt, seeking ways to forgive and build bridges rather than build walls and hold on to anger and pain. The way of forgiveness and of peace through justice that refuses to strike back is a very tough commitment, especially when we have been struck hard by abuse and injustice ourselves. But until we follow Christ's path, even when it involves a cross, we will never be free. We will be imprisoned inside even if we make our enemies suffer. The three sisters were driven by love not retaliation. Their energy came from positive commitment to friends and neighbours, not fear of the Nazis or hate for them.

Finally, with the enabling of God's grace, we commit ourselves to maturing as part of a community that provides us with inner resources to fill up our lamps with oil, with faith, hope and love for the journey and for the trials of life that will come at some point. We don't know if the three sisters were part of a community. But the Mordechais had become like family for them. They experienced genuine love and care, and out of such love and care, their lamps were lit and they were committed to love and care in return, wherever it would lead.

So it is for us. Our four commitments of membership help us focus on what's vital for living our lives well, of finding inner strength through faith, hope and love, of giving something back to the community that is here to support us and resources us with what we need spiritually to live out concretely our relationships in the world. We are committed to justice for others, not just ourselves, and our fight for justice mirrors the way of Christ when we are motivated by the promise of healing reconciliation rather than wounded retaliation.

OK, so what happened to the Mordechais and the sisters who helped them? The sisters didn't see the Mordechais again. But they had heard that they'd survived and escaped. They had made it to Israel where they'd settled. After a time, the sisters and members of the Mordechais family began to correspond and financial support for the sisters began coming

from Israel through a fund set up by the Mordechais in gratitude. After many years, the two older sisters died, leaving the youngest, Dina, on her own. This brings us to 2019.

The surviving Mordechais family organized a great reunion in Israel, arranging transportation for - Dina. Dina, who is now 92 yrs of age, was only 14 when she made a commitment to help her adopted Jewish family. The surviving Mordechais elders were only little children when their family escaped. Now the family of over 40 - parents, children and grandchildren - all came together in Jerusalem with Dina so they could express their gratitude in person. As you can imagine, it was an emotional event.

Who could have imagined that courageous choices rooted in core life commitments could have such life-changing implications affecting so many people. And yet, such choices are made every day, choices to act or fail to act, choices based on meaningful commitments or choices based on false and self-serving commitments. The questions for each of us on this membership Sunday is this: What commitments undergird our lives? What commitments will define the meaning of our lives and our legacy? What commitments will shape our choices and our relationships?

May the foundation who is Christ and this community of Armour Heights we call the body of Christ become a growing source for the oil in the lamp of your soul. May the foundation who is Christ and this community of Armour Heights we call the body of Christ become the basis of the faith, hope and love you carry with you as the trials of life come up against you; Amen.