

**Decisions by Vertie Powers**  
**Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-15 and Matthew 25:1-13**  
**Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, November 9, 2008**

Good morning to you my brothers and my sisters, it is good to be here this morning. I bring you greetings from your sister churches in the Eastern North Carolina Association where we are all just trying to be faithful to God. I also bring you greetings from all of the churches in the Southern Conference. As I said at the earlier service, I give thanks, we all give thanks to you for your serious and abundant generosity. Your giving to Our Church's Wider Mission and to the Eastern North Carolina Association along with all the other covenanted congregations, allows the ministry of the church and the association to go forward. In the Eastern North Carolina Association we have the champions, we give scholarships, we have prepared persons for authorized ministry, and we are involved in church development work. These are just a few of the things that can continue here in the Eastern North Carolina Association and the Southern Conference because of your being able to bless us with your extravagant giving. Thank you.

Pray with me: Gracious God, grant us the perception to see life as it is, to see your kingdom as it is, to see ourselves as we are. Too often, O God, we major in life's trivialities, concerning ourselves with things that do not make a great deal of difference, consumed with care about matters of no great significance. We are mortal, we do not always see beyond the moment, and so, O God, we ask that you forgive us. We ask that you'll deliver us, O Lord, from life's infinite distractions. Put things into perspective for us. Prepare us for life's inevitable crises by giving us a faith that can endure. Give us the boldness and the courage to commit to you and to your way for our lives. This is your servant's prayer in the precious name of Jesus and we say Amen.

These past few weeks we have all made decisions. When we went to the polls we made a choice in who we would vote for. Now this was not an easy campaign. Negativity was all over the place coming from almost everybody. Certainly, in the majority of ads that I saw, there was something negative, and I wondered if we would all get through this together. And at the end, when a great number of people rejoiced, there were heard rumblings of racial hatred and religious differences and death-dealing violence. Can't we all make a decision to just get along?

Once again, after hearing the text read, we are faced with the task of making decisions, decisions that cannot be put off until a better time presents itself. Will we come together as a nation and work together as a people who have come to form a more perfect union? Will we come together as the church that Jesus prayed for, "That we may all be one?" We the church must lead by example in all things and not forfeit the opportunity to do so. Life's important decisions cannot be postponed forever. Eventually a crisis comes and we must demonstrate who we are and where our commitment lies. This gospel calls for a verdict, a decision, and now is the time to decide.

Let's take another look at today's parable. I'm not really sure that I like this parable. This parable is one of who is in and who is out. This parable is one of this is mine, I'm not sharing. In all of the other parables that we've read and we've heard about, it's been one of invitation: Come the door is open. Come, let me share with you what I have. But today's parable is a parable urging decisive preparedness. It's a parable that speaks about the advent of Christ and it calls for a decision now. And if we link this parable to the passage in Joshua, it begs the question, whom will you serve this day? And some of the maidens in the parable decided not to decide, which is, we know, a decision. In this day, this day between crisis and advent, we are to live as those who know where history is moving. We are to be prepared as we wait for the fulfillment of the

promises of God. Preparedness, this kind of preparedness, is an active rather than a passive virtue. We must decide.

Jesus told this parable towards the end of his earthly life, this parable of the ten maidens. And it begins, like I said, like so many others, with an invitation, a gracious invitation: Ya'll, come to a party! And it reminds us of the other parties that we've heard about in scripture: the party that the father threw for the returning prodigal son, when a gracious extravagant host invites everyone to come and make merry. But at this party, the bridegroom, the one for whom the party has been organized and planned, has been delayed. So some of them wander off, knowing that they will probably have time to get back to attend the party. Some fall asleep, and the maidens that didn't have the foresight to bring extra oil, their lamps began to flicker. And as they're flickering, there comes the announcement, "the bridegroom is here, the party can now begin!"

And so they run to their sisters and say, "Share with us!"

And their sisters say "Not this time. You have to go purchase your own. Go buy some more." So they go to purchase some more oil and the party starts without them and when they return, it is too late. The door is shut. They bang on the door, but no, the party has begun. It's in full swing and the door is shut. It's closed...it's too late.

How many times have you heard that God is gracious, God is slow to anger, God is always abounding in steadfast never ending love? Always, there is still time. How many times have we heard that? And so how many times have we put off the things we need to do today because there is still time? There is all the time in the world! There comes a time when there is no more time. Don't you know that life is just like that? The little beeper on the machine falls silent. The beating heart stops. We gasp. Life flashes in an instant before our eyes. The door is shut. And like the maidens, we ran to do, so that we could be prepared and it is too late. The church has been waiting for the return of Christ. It has been over 2000 years since it was affirmed that Jesus is to come again in fulfillment of the kingdom with triumph and power. Two thousand years! Can you imagine? That's a long time to wait and watch. Some of us have fallen asleep. Some of us have burned our lamps until the oil is almost gone.

I am confident that this parable addresses us here today, on November 9, 2008. This parable should create in us a sense of urgency, because we live in an age where there are so many choices out there and sometimes we just can't make a choice, we can't decide what would be best for us. And so will we be like the maidens who decide not to decide, which ultimately is to decide, or will we be like the maidens who knew something was about to happen and so they prepared to wait for the promised fulfillment of the promises of God.

I believe that we are to live as those who know where history is moving as we live in the 'twix and the 'tween of Christ's coming. We cannot postpone our decisions while waiting for more data to come in. We can not wait to get it all ironed out, all nailed down, all fixed up, all certain and sure. We cannot wait until we can be absolutely certain and we can't wait for the right time to commit. We cannot wait to have it all explained to us in ways that are clear and concise. We cannot wait until we know what it all really means.

The advent of Christ calls for a decision. Whom will you serve this day? Life does not go on forever. There will not always be a tomorrow. Today is the day for decision as it is every day. Finally, there is the moment when Jesus looks at us. Enough evasion, enough dodging, enough ducking! Choose this day who you will serve, says Joshua, and the door was shut says Jesus. We are to be as extravagant and reckless and responding to the grace that we have been given as Jesus was in showing us such grace. Let us, this day, recommit ourselves wholly to God.

A new world is waiting out there, to be ushered in. A new condition among men and women waiting to pierce the gray clouds of our hate, of our greed, of our narrow nationalism and our childish preoccupation with our own importance. God has made of one blood, all nations and all peoples and from this grand promise we can rebuild our attitudes and redesign our strategies and refine our goals and reorder our priorities to conform to the will of God. Then we will understand why starving children everywhere should be fed today. Then it will become a pure delight to see the walls of racism come tumbling down and a kingdom of love and righteousness rise among us. Recommit yourselves today wholly to God. Now is the time. Don't wait until the door is shut. We can do this. We can make a decision before the door closes. We can do this. Yes we can. Yes we can. As the people of God we can be a people that God has called us all to be. Amen. Amen.