

“We’re Being Nudged”

New London UMC

Sun., Nov. 8, 2020

Matthew 25:1-13^{NRSV}; I Thessalonians 4: 13-18^{NRSV}

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Daniel Kahneman an Israeli psychologist and economist won the 2002 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science for his work on the psychology of judgment and decision-making. His work influenced Richard Thaler of the University of Chicago. In 2017 Thaler won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics for his contributions to behavioral economics for incorporating psychologically realistic assumption into analyses of economic decision-making. But it was the 2008 book that Thaler and legal scholar Cass Sunstein wrote that caught peoples’ attention with the title, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. Have you heard of this “nudge” theory? I think you may know more about this theory than you realize. Basically the “nudge” theory explores how small, deliberate influences can take advantage of the brain’s ability to make decisions rapidly. These decisions can be contrary to what we would decide if we took more time to deliberately apply logic and values to the decision making process. For example, a “nudge” that we’re all familiar with is ‘upselling’ – where someone intends to buy one thing but are then asked if they’d like to instead get ‘more.’ This can go way beyond just, “Would you like fries with that?” Just when you think you’re almost done with a transaction you are presented with a whole new range of upgrades and options: more features, more stations, leather instead of cloth upholstery, etc. Suddenly you have to make a decision that you hadn’t considered, or hadn’t intended to make. And whether we choose to ‘upgrade’ could depend on how our brain automatically associates the ‘upgrade’ with our own self-image, or how we want the salesperson to see us, or the level of anxiety that is triggered by being forced to make a sudden decision. It can be hard to slow down and think clearly when we’ve been “nudged” like this. . . . Another “nudge” would be to say that something is the “most popular choice” – or that the majority of consumers in your community (or globally) use this model or brand or product. This “nudge” will appeal to us if we desire to ‘fit in’ and ‘be popular’ or if our brain identifies this as a ‘safety in numbers’ type of choice. . . . Another “nudge” will present a comparison, or ranking, such as your utility consumption compared to the other households in your neighborhood or community. This “nudge” taps into our competitive nature: would we rather be in the top 10% of households that use renewable energy – or in the bottom 90%? . . . Or perhaps you noticed how “nudges” were used in recent political campaigns to imply that voting one way or another is what a “good” citizen of The United States of America would do – and don’t we all want to be good citizens? And don’t we all want to associate with other good citizens? . . . Our brains will automatically choose whatever can quickly be determined as the ‘favorable’ choice in any situation. But our brains are susceptible to being “nudged” to favor one choice over another.

Obviously “nudging” has been going on for a long, long time. We can find it in Jesus’ example of the ten bridesmaids. There is one group that brings extra oil for their lamps. The other group does not. When we hear that, don’t we automatically assume that the ten

bridesmaids are made up of two cliques or groups of friends? My brain filters that out in this way: I think that one group has been bridesmaids before, or they just know from past experience that “anything that can go wrong, will go wrong” when it comes to a wedding. While the other group of bridesmaids lacks this level of experience, or simply doesn’t see the need to come prepared to wait however long it may take for the bridegroom to appear. . . . And if the groom had shown up closer to the time that everyone apparently expected him to get there – well, no one would have noticed any difference in the bridesmaids’ preparations because ALL of their lamps would have been lit and glowing! It’s only when the groom’s *estimated* arrival time didn’t match up with his *actual* arrival time that the difference in the bridesmaids’ preparations became evident.

How is the kingdom of God like that?! Do you think Jesus is saying that our preparations and God’s timing should factor into how we understand what the kingdom of heaven will be like? Or does it seem like Jesus is giving us a “nudge” here to be sure we are ready to be faithful for the long haul, or to not assume that we have plenty of time to work on deepening our relationship with God? . . . Or is Jesus “nudging” at our self-identity or self-image as people of faith? Do we want to see ourselves as faithful followers who are prepared to wait however long it takes until Jesus comes again and escorts us into the heavenly banquet? Or do we know we’re not ready, and that we could be left standing outside the door with Jesus saying, “Sorry, I don’t know you”? What is Jesus “nudging” us to see and do? Doesn’t it seem like Jesus is encouraging us to examine our hearts, minds, and souls about how we’re living right NOW?

And I think that same sense of awareness of how we’re living NOW ties into what the apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica. He encouraged them to live in hope NOW in anticipation of the future coming of the Lord. Paul “nudged” them to not fuss over the timeline for the Lord’s coming – even if it was WAY different from what they first anticipated. And not to despair if fellow believers, or they themselves, should die before the Lord’s coming. I think that what Paul told the Thessalonians, and is telling us is that if our focus is on following Jesus by loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and on loving others as we love ourselves – then we *are* prepared to fully live each and every day; and we have no reason to fear death, or to fear when the Lord will come again. It won’t matter whether we have already died in faith, or are living faithfully, our lives will be caught up together with the Lord forever.

FOREVER. That’s really the ultimate “nudge” isn’t it? To choose who we want to be with, and where we want to be, **forever**. And this choice isn’t about how we can prepare for our own little bitty 100 yard sprint with the Lord, it’s about how we’re preparing ourselves for the eternal marathon of being together forever with the Lord. What’s our commitment to being prepared for the longest haul ever? Jesus implies we need to have plenty of oil in our lamps to live with readiness for that. Or to use another metaphor, we need to send down and spread out our roots to start soaking up God’s living water now.

We need to be so well-rooted so we will not be blown away by storms of heartache, trouble, or doubt while we're waiting for the coming of the Lord. We also need to be rooted together so we can root for each other, to encourage one another to hold on, to see it through, to continue to practice what we preach, to have hope even though we know neither the day nor the hour of the coming of the Lord. Because when we have one another, and God's Holy Spirit at work in us and through us, then we are well on our way to being as prepared as we can be.

Thanks be to God! Amen.