

*“If Only... God is Faithful”*

Stewardship Sermon Series for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, November 6, 2011

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

**Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25**

*The Tribes Renew the Covenant*

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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

<sup>14</sup> “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. <sup>15</sup> 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.”

<sup>16</sup> Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; <sup>17</sup> 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. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; <sup>18</sup>

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.”

<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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.” <sup>21</sup> And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!” <sup>22</sup> 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.” <sup>23</sup> He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” <sup>24</sup> The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” <sup>25</sup> So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

***“Choose this day whom you will serve.”***

A few years back there was an anti-drug campaign called *“Just Say No”*.

Honestly, I was never a real fan of the campaign

because at its root was a negative approach to a real human need.

The best way to change human behavior is to replace it with a positive.

Going on a diet?

Put down the Halloween candy and pick up some grapes.

If we say no to one addiction, to one distraction, to one god or another,

then it follows that we need a positive:

to what and to whom do we say yes?

Today is a very good day to make a decision.

“Choose this day whom you will serve.”

There are no atheists.

We all serve gods.

How many gods do you have?

Money? Cell phones? Social networks? Sports? Television? Make your own list.

Will you choose a god of your own creation or the One who created you?

Would you prefer a god you can manipulate, control, claim for your side,

one to put in a box,

one who will endorse your own prejudices and preferences?

Will you seek instead to follow a mighty God who loves you

and calls you to a life of service?

This day we choose the “if only” of our life: to whom will we be faithful?

If only I could get past the idols and distractions and deterrents!

If only I could make a covenant, a commitment, and stick with it!

If only I could believe that God was faithful to me,

then, then, then I could respond in kind!

If only I would use this time in my life

for reflection and re-evaluation of my commitments,

then I could walk and move forward

in my Christian spiritual journey.

We have choices to make, you and I.

Our choice will be a statement to the world about our priorities.

All that flows from your decision will impact your values,

your relationships, and the passion and purpose of your life.

***“Choose this day whom you will serve.”***

We have good neighbors who are active at a nearby church.

The parents serve on various committees,

the children are involved in programs and pageants,

and the whole family participates in weekly worship services.

Whenever they experience personal trials and tribulations

they are in constant communication with their pastor.

In good weather and bad, every Sunday morning

we drove to our church services around the same time.

Until August.

In early August as I was backing down my driveway

I saw in my rear view mirror a boat.

Not a great big boat. I wouldn't sail it from Savannah to the Bahamas.

It's just the right size for a family, a picnic basket, and an ice chest for beverages.

For the remainder of the summer

when we arrived home from church in our family van

we noticed that their van was gone, too, and so was the boat.

Good Christians had made a choice.

Do you imagine their choice affected their congregation?

After over twenty six years of pastoral leadership in congregations,

I am grateful for the literally thousands of disciples of Jesus Christ

with whom my family and I have been blessed to serve alongside.

We are thankful for those who stay the course

and live out their commitment to Christ and His Church.

Their faces and names come easily

because we have been through so much together.

I can also easily recall many, many wonderful Christians,

people who are smart, well-intentioned, faithful, generous,

and honest as the day is long,

who have been lost to the Church of Jesus Christ

after buying a boat, a beach house, a little cabin in the woods,

a new set of titanium clubs, season tickets, you name it.

This is not the same as someone

who misses worship and can't attend anymore due to a stroke,

or who has a boss who insists on doing inventory on Sunday morning,

or having to stay home to care for an ailing family member.

Some dearly departed friends have attempted to persuade me

(but really themselves)

that they can worship God just as fervently

beside lapping waves or on a par three golf course,

but we both know they don't. Worship God, that is.

We all make choices.

How do we feel about having our choices questioned?

How do we respond when people push us, challenge us, confront us,  
and wait for us to explain our priorities?

This might entail acting like Joshua.

A friend was on a flight departing from the Midwest.

He introduced himself to a woman seated next to him.

She mentioned in passing the name of her church,

and then excitedly told how she attended

every Kansas City Chiefs game at Arrowhead Stadium,

and would often fly to see away games.

He wondered how that compared with her church tithe.

She glared and didn't say another word.

Joshua might have gotten a cold shoulder a time or two.

These contemporary stories are really nothing new.

The story of people of faith choosing to invest

precious time and resources, energy and spirit

in arenas that have slowly but surely taken us away

from a life focused on the Word and will of God

is as old as the Garden of Eden.

Even though these examples have a modern flavor, the lesson

we need to learn has somehow continued to elude us for generations.

***“Choose this day whom you will serve.”***

Joshua, the spiritual heir to Moses, ran into a similar situation.

The people were distracted and disconnected.

They had made a commitment to Yahweh but were,

to use a term attributed to non-practicing Baptists, backsliding.

They were worshipping foreign gods

and the God of Israel was lessening in their eyes.

A classic definition of sin is intentional separation;

anything that intentionally separates you from God,

your neighbor, or your self is a sin.

The Hebrew people were separating themselves

from the ways of God by prioritizing the practices of foreign gods.

Their sin was to distance and disconnect themselves

from their history, identity, and covenant with Yahweh.

God was faithful, but they weren't behaving in a like manner.

This scenario occurred very near to the end of Joshua's life.

He was clearly at a point where he may have felt

like he had nothing to lose and everything to gain for God,



so why not shoot straight from the hip and tell it like it is.

***“Choose this day whom you will serve.”***

Joshua pronounced two dramatic farewells.

In Joshua 23 we find the first farewell speech when he lifted up the importance

of absolute obedience to God’s command.

In his second farewell, Joshua went to Shechem to perform

a covenanting ceremony with the elders and heads of the families.

With bold forthrightness he bade the whole people of God

to vow their loyalty to Yahweh.

He started by reminding them – and us – how God has acted

in human history to redeem us and save our lives.

The One who created and creates delivered on promises

made to both our spiritual ancestors and to us,

and we should act accordingly with the commitment of our whole selves.

Then Joshua lowered the boom.

He said, *“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."*

The people responded, *"We will serve the Lord!"*

Joshua said, *"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."* (Joshua 24: 15, 19-22)

The people appear to have appreciated Joshua's straight talk.

Today we are inundated with coaches, people with some training and

expertise

who cheer on and encourage clients to push just a little bit further.

We find personal trainers at the gym

and personal coaches for salespersons, lawyers, pastors, and churches.

A friend who coaches überprofessionals likes to say,

*“You can always do more than you think you can.”*

Now, have you ever encountered a coach or counselor who speaks like Joshua?

Imagine being warned that you cannot serve the Lord and other gods,

and if you do, then harm will come to you... at the hands of a jealous Lord!

Imagine being warned that the covenant you make

in this sacred ceremony will bind you forever,

for you are now a witness against yourself

that you have chosen to love and serve the one true God.

No matter what you say, you cannot get away from yourself.

And, no matter what you do, God will never, ever let you go.

God’ love will hold you tight forever.

You can always be more faithful than you think you can.

Commitment in any age, in any place, in any life circumstance can be

daunting.

Do you find yourself hesitating to make a covenant that is life long?

I am reminded of a New Yorker cartoon of a woman proposing to a man.

She says, *“Look, I’m not talking about a lifetime commitment.*

*I’m talking about marriage.”* (The New Yorker January 30, 1995)

Hear again the counsel of Joshua.

Joshua addressed the priorities of the people.

He was serious as a heart attack

when he said, *“Choose this day whom you will serve.”*

He calls out to us across the ages on God’s behalf to make a commitment,

and to seal our commitment with a covenant.

He recognized that a covenant made in a public ceremony

is more likely to be honored and kept,

especially one in which there is a degree of accountability

to family and friends and a community of faith.

There are no guarantees,

yet it is nice to know one has a support network.

For those here who have already made

these life-changing, soul-saving covenants with Christ and His people,

we promise to stand by you and support you

as you strive to honor the vows you have made.

We practice covenanting ceremonies in weddings and baby dedications,

at baptisms and at the Lord's Table.

Enter into the refreshing waters of the baptistery.

Think of baptism as an outward sign of an inner commitment.

Come to the Lord's Table.

Taste and see that God is good.

Meditate on Holy Communion

being a communal expression of a sacred relationship.

Yoke yourself with this worshipping, serving, engaging community of faith.

Make a promise in a public act of worship

to love God with all your heart, your mind, your soul, and your strength.

***“Choose this day whom you will serve.”***

Trust God to honor God’s end of the deal.

Allow your soul to be enfolded and embraced in a loving body

of saints and sinners that will help you

to keep your end of the deal as well.

Together, united by the grace of God, let us lift our voices

and say, *“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!”*

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Amen.*

Extra Material:

Pastor Bill Goodin writes,

*“In one of my former parishes, an older couple who lived five or six miles out of town joined our church. They didn’t come very often, however, because ‘It was just too far to come to church very often.’ A few years later they moved into town and lived only three or four blocks from our church. Still their attendance did not improve. ‘It was just too far to come to church very often.’ His health got bad, and they moved into a nursing*

*home where I had Sunday afternoon services. Our chapel was on the third floor, their apartment was across the hall from the elevator on the fourth, but again, 'It was too far...'*

*In contrast, our church has a young woman and her daughter who attend church every Sunday. To do so, she belts her daughter into her seat in the jeep; they drive through a river (no bridge), and then drive on forty miles of dirt roads to get to the highway. Once on the highway they drive thirty-five miles into town and our church. They never miss."*

(William Goodin, God Laughs, Too, CSS Publishing, Lima, Ohio, 1990, Page 79.)

A NYer cartoon shows two gentlemen in business suits talking in a pub. One says to the other, *"It's a swell offer, Brad, and you're a great guy, but I've just got out of a bad limited partnership, and I'm not ready for that kind of commitment yet."* (The New Yorker April 22, 1991)

The prophet Joshua gathered all the elders and judges and heads of the families, and said, *"I am now old and well advanced in years;*

*and you have seen all that the Lord your God has done*

*to all these nations for your sake,*

*for it is the Lord your God who has fought for you....*

*Therefore be very steadfast to observe and do all that is written*

*in the book of the law of Moses,*

*turning aside from it neither to the right nor to the left,*

*so that you may not be mixed with these nations  
left here among you,  
or make mention of the names of their gods,  
or swear by them, or serve them,  
or bow yourselves down to them,  
but hold fast to the Lord your God,  
as you have done to this day.” (23: 2b-3, 6-8)*