

“Choose This Day Whom You Will Serve”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, November 11, 2012

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

¹⁴ “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. ¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; ¹⁷ 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; ¹⁸

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.”

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

Sermon

Joshua said to the whole people of God:

¹⁴ *“Now therefore revere the Lord,*

and serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness;

put away the gods that your ancestors served

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

¹⁵ *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.” --Joshua 24: 14-15

“Choose this day whom you will serve”

There is a place in Death Valley known as Dante’s View.

From the perch you have a choice.

You can either look down 200 feet to the lowest point in the continental United States,

a place called Black Water.

Or you can choose to look up to 14,500 feet and see Mount Whitney,

the highest peak in the continental United States.

From this one spot you can choose to feast your eyes on the highest or the lowest.

It’s your pick, my friends.

It all depends, really, on where you look.

It all depends, don’t you think, on whether you look with the eyes of faith.

It all depends on the choices you make.

We make choices everyday about whom we will serve,
how we will relate to one another,
what we will post on our social networks,
what we will communicate,
how we are going to live our lives.

The journey is home.

The choices we make daily make up our daily lives.

How we live each day, each moment, is how we live our lives.

Choose this day whom you will serve.

Maybe the cleanest way to look at this complex challenge

– we do not assume that choosing to serve and love in the name of
God is easy –

is to start with relationships.

One of my brothers served a term as president of his condominium board
of directors.

One of Jonathan Calvert's responsibilities

was to enhance communication between residents.

He and his family live in a city in a building that houses dozens of large

apartments.

His email inbox was frequently filled

with questions and comments from the residents.

One day someone wrote and said that he had a message

that he needed to deliver to another resident,

but had lost the other family's email address,

and would my brother please forward it to him.

My brother simply picked up the phone, called him, and said,

"The family you want to communicate with lives right across the hall from you.

Why don't you get up, knock on their door, and deliver your message?"

Have you observed our tendency to become isolated

even in the midst of an incredible array of tools for communication?

Either because of or in spite of high tech tools at our fingertips,

we are increasingly letting go

of our God-given gifts for being in touch with one another.

Recently someone wrote to Ann Landers

and asked her what time in the morning it was appropriate to start a lawn mower

without disturbing neighbors.

Here is a paraphrase of the response. *"I am not the one who can answer that question,"*

wrote Ann Landers. *"Why don't you go next door and ask your neighbors?"*

"Choose this day whom you will serve."

In the Book of Joshua we find the people of God

living in a troubling time...troubling because they made it so.

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 God's people were not behaving in a like manner.

Now, 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?

Choose this day whom you will serve.

Choose this day whom you will work with, alongside, on the journey of life.

Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote a terrific autobiography

about Abraham Lincoln and his Cabinet called Team of Rivals.

Despite Abraham Lincoln's lack of formal education,

humble background, and multiple losses in campaigns and life,

Lincoln is arguably the greatest president we have ever had.

One of his gifts of leadership was his willingness to gather together

the wisest minds in the nation

and place them on his cabinet to serve as his advisors

and to help run the country

– even though many of the advisors had been his rivals for the presidency

and, initially, most neither liked nor respected him.

Rather than surround himself with “yes men,”

with people who would agree with everything he said or did,

Lincoln sought out their extremely divergent opinions.

He then synthesized the collective ideas

into a clear plan of action for the greater good.

At the root of this remarkable approach

was a humility grounded in the love of God

and an eye toward healing a hurting nation.

Lincoln listened and learned and led.

He worked with whomever God sent, rivals and rejects

We have much to learn about and much to teach

about being humble, about listening and learning

from those in our midst

whom God is working though to heal the world,

to heal our communities,

to heal our bodies and souls.

My father, the Rev. George E. Calvert, taught junior high school for 15 years.

One day a boy raised his hand in class.

George Calvert was delighted,

because the boy had never once raised his hand to ask a question.

George called on him immediately.

“Mr. Calvert,” asked the boy, “do you have a white dog?”

It looks like you have white dog hair all over your pants.”

George said that in every class there would be a couple of adolescents
who were challenged to sit still for 45 minutes,
much less 6 or 7 hours.

The other faculty in the teachers' lounge would moan, saying,
"If only I didn't have so and so in my class,
then everything would be perfect."

My dad would respond,

"Work with whomever God sends into your space.

That child really needs your love.

Besides, if so and so left, another would take his
place!"

Regardless of who is on your committee, in the pew, or in the group,
work with whomever God sends.

Regardless of whomever is your next door neighbor,
your colleague at work, or the politician in office,
work with whomever God sends.

Work with whoever is your leader, your teacher, your pastor,
your elder, your child, your soul mate.

God has sent these souls into your life,

not for you to fight against or argue with or define yourself over against;

not for you to do your best to overcome or disdain or undermine;

these blessed souls are in your life to be your partner in God's service.

Work with whoever the majority elected into office.

Citizenship starts with voting;

citizenship continues with responsible actions.

Our nation can ill afford to waste any more energy tearing down our leaders;

nor should our leaders tear down the American people!

If ever there was a time for Americans from all walks of life

to pull our oars together for a common cause and a shared destination,

now is the time.

Now is the time to start cooperating, to start reconciling,

to stop tearing down and start building up.

Choose this day whom you will serve.

Good theology and good advice and good teaching

only go as far as the actions they inspire.

Sometimes the activity of God's love requires some activity.

John Trotti, longtime librarian at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond,
said that as a Boy Scout,
he was told that Boy Scouts believed
that they ought to do what they can
to leave the world a better place.

Therefore, when his Boy Scout troop went camping,
they not only left their campsite clean,
they always went around the campground
picking up other people's trash before they left.

John Trotti carried this into adult life.

When he married Joan, the two of them would wander about town,
picking up aluminum cans and bottles.

When their children were young, they pushed the baby stroller about town,
filling up a bag attached to the back with the refuse they collected.

Even after Trotti was a distinguished member of a theological faculty,
they would still bike about town, filling up bags with refuse.

They found out that the city would pay .08 cents a pound for the aluminum
cans.

So they began collecting and selling the aluminum cans,

giving the money they made to the Center for the Adult Mentally Disabled.

One day while picking up cans,

John Trotti met a man wandering the streets.

“What are you doing that for?” the man asked.

Trotti responded that he got .08 cents per pound

for the Adult Mentally Disabled by collecting the cans.

“Do they make you prove it?” the man asked.

“Prove what?” Trotti asked.

“Do they make you prove that you are mentally disabled

before they give you .08 cents per pound?” **[1]**

Listen once more to 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.”*

Let your service above self speak louder than your words.

Let your commitment to reconciliation be your living legacy.

Let your love for God be made known

by the way you choose to work and play

with those whom God sends into your life.

McGregor Jenkins tells of sitting on a log on the tip end of Cape Cod

with a weather-beaten, seafaring man.

The captain quietly whittled while McGregor spoke.

“We had talked of many things, and finally I said to him,

‘Captain, you have sailed the world over,

you have seen more wonders that I’ve ever dreamed of,

you’ve been to the Mysterious Isles,

and now I ask you,

what in all your wide experience

is the most interesting thing you ever saw?”

“The captain stopped whittling and became reflective;

he cocked his one remaining eye

upon the expanse of heaven above

and spat reflectively upon the sand.

‘Well, I dunno,’ he said. ‘I have sailed about a bit,

but first and last, coming and going, fair and foul,

I think the most interesting thing I ever seen was folks.’”

(Literature with a Large L)

Folks are interesting things!

Each one is made in the image of God.

Each one is made in the image of a mighty God who calls us to serve.

Together, united by the grace of God,

let us lift our voices to God 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:

William Willimon tells a story about his mother. He said, “My mother spent 40 years as a public school teacher. One day on our way home together, she told me how, at the faculty meeting that afternoon, her principal (whom my mother did not particularly care for) had said to the assembled teachers, *‘I am always looking for ways to improve our school. If any of you have any suggestions or criticisms, please tell me.’* “With that, one young new teacher who didn’t know any better made some criticism about the way the class schedule was set up, suggesting that it ought to be changed to make the day run more smoothly. “The principal responded with more than a touch of anger in his voice, [saying], *‘Now I don’t mean carping criticism! I mean constructive criticism.’* “My mother said, *‘I’ve worked with that principal for 20 years and I have never once heard anyone offer him any criticism that he considered to meet his standard of ‘constructive criticism.’”* [2]

Did you know that in the U.S. Constitution there is no mention about

Executive Privilege? For generations of presidencies the Executive Branch has claimed Executive Privilege for the sake of protecting secrets from being released to the public and to block indictments. Of all the American presidents, I only know of one whose will and word were equally focused on solely using his powers of persuasion to win others to the rightness of his cause. Abraham Lincoln had a no-secrets approach and openness to political leadership. He explained even complicated matters to ordinary folks in a way they could understand. This was not simply his manner or ability; this was his policy and his practice. In response to criticism from those who believed that political decisions by the government should be kept from public scrutiny, Lincoln wrote in 1842: “When the conduct of men is designed to be influenced, persuasion, kind, unassuming persuasion, should ever be adopted. It is an old and a true maxim that a drop of honey catches more flies than a gallon of gall. If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend. Therein is a drop of honey that catches his heart, which, say what he will, is the great high road to his reason.” (Life Magazine, February 1990)

[1] William Willimon, “Pulpit Resource”, Vol. 35, No. 3, Year C, Page 23-24.

[2] William Willimon, “Pulpit Resource”, Vol. 35, No. 3, Year C, Page 19.