

## **“TOGETHER IN SPIRIT: COMMITTING TO COMMUNITY”**

Joshua 24:14-18

November 15, 2020

Rev. Jerry Duggins

“Choose this day whom you will serve... as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” This scripture makes me feel old. Maybe because the day I first made this commitment was so long ago... before my ordination to ministry, before my marriage, before the days of college fellowship. The day I first realized that all those Sunday School lessons, memory verses, and church attendance were seeking a commitment from me was about fifty years ago. It’s a little vague in my memory. It could have been confirmation class. It could have been a couple years after that when I started reading and actually studying the Bible. It could have been the day I told my Sunday School teacher that I wanted to lead a Bible Study. I do remember that this scripture was very important to me and in some ways set the course that my life would take.

This scripture makes me feel old perhaps because I have faced this decision many times since that first day and I am coming to realize that “this day” is actually “every day.” I wonder sometimes if the Christian life isn’t a little like the alcoholic who needs to decide every day that he or she won’t have a drink. I know I’m making it sound like a burdensome choice and it isn’t really... just some days it’s harder to choose the Lord.

For Joshua and the Israelites, the decision was a no-brainer. With the Lord’s help they entered and conquered the land of Canaan. The Lord had given them victory over their enemies. The Lord had led them out of Egypt, had freed them from slavery and made them masters of their own destiny. Only a fool would choose to not serve the Lord.

But what happens later when Israel’s enemies threaten their borders? What happens when the enticements and pleasures of other cultures and peoples are on offer? What happens when their leaders begin to take them down a different path? What happens when the Assyrians and a century later the Babylonians lay siege to their capital city? And what happens when the city actually falls?

But you don’t even need difficult days to question the choice you made. When you look at the context of the passage from Joshua, you might feel a little less comfortable. The first time you commit yourself to following the Lord, all you see is the deliverance. You see a newly shaped people released from the suffering of slavery, secure in a new land. And you see your own deliverance. “I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.” You don’t hear the cries of the Egyptians drowning in the Red Sea after Israel miraculously crosses. You don’t see the death and suffering of those who had inhabited Canaan for generations. You don’t look at Joshua’s choice as a decision between rival gods who don’t appear to see every human life as valuable.

To be fair, this is not in fact how I see the question posed to us today. Scripture itself will reject this image of the Lord as a tribal god. In numerous other places, the Bible presents

the Lord as the God of all nations and the people of God as called to be a blessing to the nations. The choice will later be presented as a choice between God who created all things and the false gods who cannot in the end deliver on their promises. The trend of scripture moves away from this jealous god of the Ten Commandments to the God who is love in the later writings of the Hebrew Scriptures and gospels and epistles of the New Testament. These later writings don't invalidate the earlier ways in which God is depicted, but they do urge caution in what we take from them. They reinforce the reality that the Bible is the human witness to the character of God and God's dealing with the world. Interpretation requires that we take each passage of scripture with a grain of salt, placing it in the context of its time and viewing it from the perspective of the full witness of scripture and our own experience. This is not to say that the Bible is not inspired, but to claim that inspiration is far more complicated than God dictating words to stenographers. "God said and I believe it" is naïve, dangerous, even abusive of the Word of God.

So what does all this mean for our understanding of Joshua and the choice being asked of us "this day." In the first place it means that we don't have to view our commitment as a choice between rival gods except perhaps in a metaphorical sense. It means we don't have to adopt the same understanding of God's character implied by the story's context.

I've become less enamored of this story over the years. Part of that comes from a less naïve way of seeing scripture and wrestling with the difficulties posed by the text. And part of it comes from the realization that the question applies to us in a variety of contexts and that we repeatedly make this decision. We decide whom we will serve after great successes and after great loss. We decide in the midst of celebration and in the midst of suffering. We decide when faith is easy and when temptation knocks on our doors. We decide whom we will serve in the context of major decisions and life choices.

All of that sounds exhausting to me until... I realize that it's not just about me. It was enough when I first chose to serve the Lord. There's a certain joy when you first realize that God is for you... personally, that part of your decision to serve the Lord is also choosing a companion for your faith journey. And that awareness can sustain you for a while, but each time you choose again you have a little less confidence that you'll stay on the path.

God is not enough to sustain you. God doesn't even want to be enough for you. Such a notion is contrary to any understanding of love. Joshua chooses to serve the Lord with his household. The people choose to serve the Lord together. God intends human beings to be for one another. Community belongs to our essence. Yes, God calls individuals to certain tasks; but ultimately God calls a people. When we choose to serve the Lord, we commit ourselves to the community of others who choose the same.

I could not do this ministry without Janet, without dedicated elders and deacons. I could not do it without our musicians, our tech people, our other staff. Without your service to the Lord, choosing to serve the Lord becomes more and more a burden for me.

Dedication Sunday, though it has its individual components, is in fact a commitment to community, a commitment of the community of faith. We talk about our offerings as offerings to God, but they are at the same time a commitment to the church and its ministry within and beyond its walls. Choosing God apart from the community of God's people is a very lonely and burdensome and in the end unsustainable decision.

Joshua's choice is possible only with the support of his household. His decision inspires and draws in the rest of the community. Choosing God means choosing others. That's why Jesus links the commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength with the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. That is why Jesus can say, "Insofar as you did it to the least of one of these, so you did it to me." Service to God is linked with service to one another. Service to God is making a commitment to community.

Choose this day whom you will serve. This is not an invitation for you alone. Eventually, that kind of decision will wear you down. When I first read this text, I was inspired by Joshua's decision. I saw it as one I needed to make for myself, and it did set me on a path. But what excites me about the text today is the community gathered together, choosing a common purpose, committing themselves to God and to each other. The really sustaining energy behind this story is not Joshua's choice, but the choice by and for the whole community of faith.

That's why I like dedication Sunday so much, Every year we get to make this concrete commitment to God and the work of the church TOGETHER. We commit ourselves to God and one another. It isn't about the size of the pledge or whether we get enough to support next year's budget. It's about this declaration that none of us are in this alone. We give what we are able and what we cannot give in financial resources we give in other ways. On this day, together in spirit, we choose the Lord and commit ourselves to the community of faith. Amen.