



Sunday's Sermon

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Growing Together in Christ to Love and Serve All People

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

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Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Like many people, I grew up in a home with a plaque on the wall that quoted Joshua 24:15: "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." And, like many people, I ignored the context of that quote for a long time. But as with so many quotes, it takes on a deeper meaning when we pay attention to what was going on when it was said - which we do today.

And at its core, what this commitment is about is remembering God's faithfulness to us and that it is the source of our identity as God's people.

The book of Joshua tells the story of how the people of Israel came to be settled in Canaan - the Promised Land, after their time in the wilderness. It's bloody and violent, and we aren't going to go into the particulars of it here.

But by the time we get to the part of the history we read today, the people were settled in Canaan and Joshua was nearing the end of his life. So, in this dialogue, he offers his last words of instruction to the people and renews Israel's covenant commitment to their God before he dies.

And one of the things he says is, "choose this day whom you will serve." He's gauging their level of commitment to God and to the covenant God made with them to always be faithful to them.

In these verses, the verb "serve" can mean a few different things, including "worship" or "show loyalty toward," or even "obey." All of those meanings imply devotion to someone or something. And it's a devotion that isn't divided.

So, what Joshua was getting at with the Israelites is, basically, fish or cut bait. Who do you choose? Because there's no middle ground. You either serve Yahweh, the God who brought your people out of Egypt, or you don't. But if you do, we're committing together, here today, as a people. And they did.

And we know from the rest of their history, that they didn't do it perfectly. But no matter how badly they messed it up, God was still God and remained faithful to them. And God's faithfulness remains the source of their identity as God's people.

When we think about what it means for us as Christians to serve God, we're faced with the same question - who do you choose? And I think we think it's easy to say, "yes, of course we'll serve God." Same as the Israelites did.

But we're also faced with the same sense of either/or that they were faced with, because there's no middle ground for us, either. We either serve God or we don't. And answering "yes" doesn't mean we'll do it perfectly all the time because we can't. We aren't capable of it any more than the Israelites were.

But in the same way God is faithful to them, God is also faithful to us. And that faithfulness is the source of *our* identity as God's people.

As people who serve God, we recognize that we live in a world that sometimes clashes with what we believe about God and the way God calls us to live. Sometimes those differences are obvious, and sometimes they're more subtle - at least on the surface.

But serving God means we don't serve any other gods. And this isn't limited to gods of other nations or gods with other names. In his explanation of the First Commandment, Martin Luther reminds us that anything anyone fears, loves, and trusts above everything else - whether that is riches, self, prestige, or whatever - is one's God.

In other words, whatever is most important to you is your god. In that respect, then, we all serve many gods at various times in our lives. Things like our political views, or what we spend our money on, or how much money we make, or the kind of car we drive, or where we live, where we go on vacation, the list goes on.

And I don't mean to say that those decisions aren't important, but when they become the center of our lives - as in the most important thing? Then that means God isn't. And that's what trips us up. And I've probably said this before, but if those other things are first in our lives long enough, *they* become the source of our identity and we end up serving them instead of God.

And we soon learn that, unlike God, those things only offer temporary comfort, stability, and truth. But God is faithful to us in all circumstances. And when we remember that, when God and God's faithfulness to us are first in our lives, we remember *whose* we are not just as individuals but as a community.

And we remember the things that are important to our congregation - that our core values don't include a particular political party, skin color, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or income level, but rather worship, discipleship, outreach, and relationships.

And that our mission statement is growing *together* in Christ to love and serve all people. In other words, that when we serve God - we do so with humility, and mercy and grace, and in love and faithfulness. The qualities of God that are in our own lives.

When God and God's faithfulness to us are first in our lives, it gives us the strength to face the pandemic head-on and work toward controlling it. And to speak the truth about last week's presidential election - specifically that it makes clear how divided our nation is when it comes to matters of racial justice, climate reform, gender justice, and protection for the people who are most vulnerable in our society.

When God and God's faithfulness to us are first in our lives, it opens our hearts to recognize the other person - whoever that might be - as a child of God and as loved by God. And *together* we figure out how to move forward to serve God as a *community*.

When we commit to serve God, there's no middle ground. We either do it or we don't. But there's no middle ground to God's faithfulness to us, either. No matter how badly we mess up our service to God, no matter how many times we forget God's faithfulness to us, God will still be God.

And the *true* source of our identity, not just as individuals but as a community, will always be God's faithfulness to us. Thanks be to God! Amen.