

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 22, 2021

Polka Service

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-69

We make choices every day, don't we. Some are pretty basic. How many times to hit the snooze, what to have for breakfast, what route to take to work. Some are more complex. Do I do my homework now, or later? Do I sit with that group at lunch or this one? Do I respond to that remark from a coworker? Some choices have even deeper implications. Do I choose to accept that I am an alcoholic and not drink today? Do I acknowledge that this relationship is abusive and leave it? Do I accept that I cannot deal with this on my own and need to talk to a counselor?

Making decisions, choosing, is a fundamental part of being human.

Sometimes those choices happen within a limited range. Kind of like you do for a child- Which book do you want to read before bed? Which of these pairs of pants would you like to wear today? There is no option to not have a book read or to not wear pants, but there are choices within that range.

This is the kind of choice Joshua presents to the gathered tribes of Israel.

This incident from our reading takes place at the end of Joshua's life. Joshua has been a faithful and wise leader to the Israelites- the second in command to Moses, the one who actually took them into this land promised by God. Who led them in the successful military campaigns against the Canaanites. With the

defeat of their enemies, the land had then been assigned to the various tribes of Israel and life had settled into a kind of normalcy.

Now, as his time nears an end, Joshua has called them together in one place, Shechem, a place connected with choosing. There, Joshua presents the assembly of Israel with one of these limited choices. “Choose this day whom you will serve.” Will you serve the gods your ancestors served in Egypt, will you serve the gods of the people whose land you are living in? Or will you serve the LORD?

There is no option for being a free agent. Joshua knows the truth. We all serve something or someone. And that service drives our choices, our actions, our speech. The language used here is that of a slave or servant. It means not only inner devotion- with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, but also the outer devotion of action.

“Choose this day whom you will serve.”

The disciples of Jesus have been presented this same kind of choice, although not as explicit. They are having trouble accepting his difficult teaching, the word used for difficult means dried-out, unyielding- think a tough piece of jerked meat. It is difficult enough so that many of them did not follow Jesus anymore. Jesus then turns to the twelve and asks them, “Hey, you want to change this relationship?” In essence, “Who you going to follow? Me or someone else?”

While each of these questions by Joshua and Jesus might sound like a once and for all decision, it really isn't, is it? There are at least four times within scripture that God and God's people revisit their commitment to God in a formal way. As

we've seen clearly this summer in following the prophets, the people of Israel often stray from serving God, even after they make that commitment.

We also know that after Peter's declaration for Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." These same disciples will abandon Jesus on the cross. Peter will actively deny knowing him.

And yet, what happens time and again in scripture? Even when the people of Israel go astray, God sends the prophets to remind them of who God is, what God has chosen them and called them to be. God gives them another chance. Even when Peter has denied him, Jesus, who chose Peter and all of the twelve to follow him, gives Peter an opportunity to affirm his love and devotion to Jesus.

"Choose this day whom you will serve"

The reality is that like the Israelites, like the disciples, we too have been claimed by God. Claimed to be God's people, called to follow after God, to be a shining beacon to the world of what life together should be like as we live in the Reign of God.

"Choose this day whom you will serve"

Martin Luther talks about our baptism not as a once and done event, but an ongoing reality. That every day God chooses us, and every day we have the opportunity to dip into those baptismal waters and proclaim with Joshua, "As for me, I will follow the Lord!" - with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. In thought as well as in word and actions.

In a little over two months, our 9th graders will be affirming their baptism. Stepping fully into the promises their parents made for them as infants. Hearing the question of Jesus, “Who are you going to follow? Me or someone else?” and answering in that moment “You, Jesus. I’ll follow you.”

We make a mistake if we think that affirmation is a once and done event.

Instead, it is an ongoing, daily choice. When we wake up this morning we are asked, “Whom will you serve?” Whom will you give all your heart, soul, mind, and strength to? Whom will you walk behind, emulate in speech and action?

We have many choices for whom we will serve, don’t we? We could choose to serve a political party or leader. To devote our time, energy, and resources to that alone. To walk and talk and think as they do. We could choose to serve the pursuit of money, or fame, or power. We could choose to serve the well-being of the planet or of a group of human beings who are oppressed by other human beings. Some choices seem like pretty good ones! They might even match some of the things Jesus stands for.

Yet, they are not Jesus. They are not the God who brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, who protected them through 40 years of wandering, who brought them to the land of plenty, and who even now prospered them and their work. They are not the God made flesh, who suffered a horrible death on the cross so that we might believe that God loves us, enough to die so that we might turn from all these other choices (maybe especially the ones that seem so good) and follow him and really live.

The choice to commit ourselves to be servants of God, to be followers of Jesus, is not an easy one. There are things required of us that will challenge us- this is the very reason that the Israelites keep straying from God to follow other gods.

Because it is easier.

But in the half century that I have been alive, I have seen how even the best of these other gods ultimately leads not to life but death. Because they are rooted not in God, but in us. How even those committed to protecting the planet or a vulnerable group of people can so easily move into justifying injuring or killing others to achieve their ends, can so easily demonize those who do not follow that path or who resist them. And this is not the reign of God and ultimately does not bring life.

So, every day I wake up and say, "You have chosen me, God. I have no idea why... but I also choose to serve you. Where else can I go? For in you lies life." And every day I will fall short of this goal, get distracted like the dog in the movie UP! "Squirrel!", probably in the next hour or two. Begin to wander, even just a little bit, from following behind Jesus and start to make my own path.

Yet, I know that God is gracious and merciful, and that I can dip again into those waters of baptism that will make me new again, and that I will make that commitment again, and make choices to follow the difficult road God has laid before me. I will choose to love my neighbor in need, even though what it might mean scares the daylights out of me. And find a human being, scared, imperfect, but trying so hard to change. I will choose to not engage in tearing people down in social media, but to build them up. To look at what they do in the best possible way. To try and understand them. To ask myself where I might be in error.

I will choose to sit with my fellow believers and chew on the words of Jesus, these difficult beef jerky words that need a lot of masticating to even begin to go down. But in which I know there lies the path to life. Life fuller and more abundant than any life I might have following the god of money, or power. The god of a political party or tribe. The more I see of us, the more I am convinced down those paths lies only death.

“Choose this day whom you will serve”

God already loves each of you enough to have chosen you. God’s love for you relies on that alone. But answer for yourself the question, who will you serve this day? This hour? This moment? How do your actions, your words, your priorities reflect that?

I invite you, join us on the way, chewing on the difficult words of Jesus, but being fed with the true bread that will bring true life, fuller and more abundant. Come this day and be fed with that bread made tangible- bread and wine that is the body and blood of Jesus. Because we are what we eat! Because all the other food offered to us will ultimately turn to ash in our mouths. But this food is sweeter than honey. And will sustain us on the way.

“Choose this day whom you will serve”

As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. For where else shall we go? He has the words of eternal life.

We’d love to have you join us.