

“We Will Serve the Lord”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 23, 2009

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Psalm 84

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” This particular verse hangs on my bedroom wall – a framed gift that I received on the date of my ordination to ministry. When I moved into my house, I chose to hang it in my bedroom as a reminder of what I consider to be an important pledge that I have made with God. While, in the context of our Old Testament reading this morning, this is a very public pledge – made by Joshua before the assembled leaders of the Hebrew tribes – I consider it to be a private promise. Private, not because I do not wish for anyone else to know about it, but because I feel it is my responsibility to keep and fulfill. It reminds me that I have chosen to serve the Lord on behalf of my household, but not irrespective of them. I hope and pray that the day will come when my sons will make the decision for themselves: a decision about loyalty and discipleship – choosing to be followers and servants of the God that they have come to know and love.

As households, our promise is to follow the pattern of Christ as it has been carried on through the people of God. A part of that promise is the covenant that individuals make with congregations. It used to be that this was an easy promise to make – because generations of family members would be expected to live in the same place, and those generations adhered to the same church and the same denomination. With all of these things assumed, there were fewer alternatives to the ongoing covenant set up by ancestors in the faith.

Today, our households are different. They do not always comprise our entire families, or all of its generations, and many times households are made up of something far different from those who share our genetic lineage. Joshua recognized that as leader of his own household – and leader of the Hebrew nation made up of many different households of many different tribes – he was making both a public and private pledge. He knew about the many things that go on behind closed doors within a household; in addition to the things that others could see about his public behavior. To Joshua, this pledge was for both: his private affairs as well as his public dealings – the ways he chose to interact within his own family, as well as the choices and relationships that extended far beyond the walls of his home.

So, what is it that Joshua is asking the leaders of the Hebrew household to consider that day? First, he asks them to remember, to recall the great things that the Lord has done for them. He is speaking of course about their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. But, more recently, Joshua is referring to God having paved the way for their entry into the land of promise, moving aside the enemies that stood in their way – even having taken down the walls to Jericho without force.

Like Moses before him, Joshua reminds the people that redemption from Egypt and the gift of a promised land come with an obligation to choose, serve and obey the Lord.¹ It was an obligation that is outlined in the Ten Commandments and reiterated through what Jesus identifies as the greatest commandment: love of God and love of neighbor.

As they prepared to enter into the promised land, Joshua tells the people of God that they must make their choice then, on that day. It was not a decision that could wait until after they had seen their new home and met their new neighbors. It was the final step in the long period of preparation that had been experienced in the wilderness. They had been taught that God was with them – traveling alongside them – even though the road that they traversed was long and winding, and one that was unpaved. God had been with them when they were tired and hungry and thirsty. God was not back in Egypt, even if that promised them pots of flesh and a roof over their head; and God was not ahead of them, waiting to see if they would pass the test with faithful obedience. Instead, God had appeared to them in smoke and clouds; God was speaking to them with messages of both grace and authority.

God had been with them and God was still with them. And so, this was the day to claim that in the future, their allegiance would remain with the Lord. There would be a lot of new options for them to explore: a different god for everything under the sun. There would be the desire to establish themselves and prove themselves, and the temptation to do it on their new neighbors' terms. Who would fill the most powerful positions? Who could have the finest things? Whose kids would be the stars of the soccer team and get the lead parts in the school play?

This was the day that they must decide: would their loyalty be with God, who had set them free from bondage and had been with them for their forty years of journeying, or would they keep their allegiance be kept in the air, waiting to see whether their new reality would meet their own desires and expectations? And then, if their new gods seemed to be failing the transplanted Hebrews, what newer gods could they look to? And how soon would the story of their deliverance be forgotten in their new land?

Joshua's uncompromising stance on an exclusive covenant poses a significant challenge.² In an age of pluralism, when we ourselves and those around us have many spiritual and religious options – including the option of no religion at all – how do we ask for a pledge of absolute devotion while still welcoming those that are still seeking, who are not ready to make this kind of commitment? This is a balance that we, as the church, must seek to achieve – faithfulness coupled with an open invitation; fulfilling the responsibilities of our relationship with God while also loving our neighbors with the open acceptance that we desire from others.

This month, our session approved a recommendation from the stewardship and finance committee to undertake, as part of this year's stewardship giving program; what

¹ Charles Raynal in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 3

² Talitha Arnold, "True Grit" on *Textweek.com*

in the church is usually called an “every member visitation.” If you are not familiar with this approach, it involves the recruitment of a team of volunteers who – after some training and having made their own financial pledge to the church – call upon the remaining members of the church to discuss, hopefully among other things, whether they would consider making a financial commitment as well.

Before choosing to undertake this type of stewardship campaign, a number of things need to be considered. First, the leaders of the church must prayerfully consider whether such an approach can be done without any feelings of coercion, respecting the privacy of all the church members. A financial pledge to the church is essentially a private matter – an indication of the individual’s relationship with God. And yet, it also is not the sum total of a person’s relationship with God, but only one piece of the puzzle. Therefore, those who train the visiting team – as well as those team members themselves – must be able to clearly communicate our church’s understandings concerning financial stewardship. This will mean creating materials that can interpret to the members how the church plans to utilize the money that is donated to fulfill the needs of the church and, hopefully, fulfill that which God has called the church do.

This can be an uncomfortable experience for almost everyone involved. It is never easy to discuss financial matters in the church and I doubt that anyone, myself included, feels completely comfortable discussing their pledge. Like me, they probably wish that they could commit to a higher giving level – either to the church or to some other of the many ways that we can share our blessings with others. And yet, it is also unreasonable and unfair to expect that everyone in the church can or should give at either the same dollar amount or percentage of giving. While a tithe – giving ten percent of what we earn or what we own – might be a good target to set our sights on, it may not be the appropriate present target for every individual, or every household.

In too many churches, financial stewardship campaigns have been done without proper sensitivity. And yet, the leaders of Valley have decided that this is an important opportunity for spiritual formation and pastoral care at this particular time. It is, in essence, like Joshua who told the Hebrew people that this is the day they must choose. We will not, in respect to the privacy that this type of decision warrants, ask that a pledge be made at the time of the home visit, but instead that each household will prayerfully consider what pledge they will make. Like the Hebrews, we have not yet reached our final destination. Ours is still a community that is in transition, and a people that are still in formation. Lots of unanswered questions still lie ahead. Other options for us to place our faith and allegiance exist, and yet we are being asked this day to state who is our God and how we will choose to serve.

Because we have been gathered together as a community of faith, our pledge to God also becomes a public issue. Not public in the sense that you must shout out your beliefs from the rooftops, but public in the sense that it is shared with your sisters and brothers in the faith. As part of the church, your household has grown to include people of different generations, backgrounds and experiences. The gathered community of faith is for you a second, although not secondary, household. The way we treat one another

matters; the priorities and preferences that we choose matter to one another; and the way that together we proclaim and display our loyalty matters to how we are viewed in the world around us.

“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” I hope and pray that, if not already, you might come to the point that you can – on this day – declare your uncompromising loyalty to God. But, also, that you will do it with humility – realizing that you can only speak for yourself – and with generosity – recognizing that in doing so, you play a part in shaping this community and, with God’s help, transforming the world. AMEN.