

Wesley United Methodist Church

April 30, 2017

“Choose This Day Whom You Will Serve...”

Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25

Choices, choices, choices. “Whatever you choose” is the slogan of our age. Every day we have placed before us many choices, almost too many. Television cable channels keep expanding—there are now hundreds of options. On the internet, there are millions of web-sites. We are overloaded!

The amount of information we can receive is overwhelming. We cannot process it. The choices are too much.

The same thing is true in the world of religion. There is a book listing more than ten thousand different religious denominations in our nation. We have enough choices to switch churches every two to three days if we wished. I’ve heard of church shopping, but that would be ridiculous!

Faced with choices, our age would like to have it all. Our culture prefers both, not just either/or. We resent the word “no” and taken on more commitments, refusing to let go of the old ones. But choices must be made, choices about where to focus our energies, time and behavior. Making a decision to do one thing closes out other possibilities. We may have the capacity to receive hundreds of television channels, but we can only watch two or three at once. Kids may want to play on all sports teams, but they cannot play all the games on the same day. Maturity involves choice, either/or.

This is true in our faith. To choose the Christian life is to close out other possibilities. Can we say we are Christians without giving up contradictory behavior? Can we claim the name of Christ without giving up other claims? Are we willing to pick up the cross and choose to follow Christ alone?

Joshua understood that the most dangerous time for people of faith was not the time of hardship, but the time of affluence, the time of many choices.

The people of Israel had come through a harrowing period of their history.

After slavery in Egypt, they had wandered in a desert wilderness for an entire generation. Then, upon crossing the Jordan River, they had fought and won the land promised to them. Things were going to get easier now.

They had arrived in the land flowing with milk and honey.

All they needed would be provided, and this is the most dangerous time.

Comedian Dick Gregory once spoke about how the lack of commitment in American churches stems from freedom. As long as we are free to go to church on Sunday or not to go, there will not be much zeal. It takes opposition and hardship to generate religious fervor. To illustrate this, Gregory said that if a tank were in front of the church door on Sundays to keep people away, attendance would increase significantly. As soon as you tell us we cannot go inside, we get fiery. Faced with freedom and choice, we become lethargic. Faced with oppression, we fight to the death.

So, ironically in a land of choice and religious freedom we become lethargic.

It is one of the symptoms of the decline of the church. Christians are becoming increasingly illiterate in our faith and apathetic. Christianity, a faith that requires our minds, hearts, bodies, and souls, becomes a hobby. Instead of integrating faith into the very core of our beings, we banish it to the margins.

Joshua could imagine what would happen. Tolerating the gods of the Canaanites was tempting in a land of easy choice. Joshua knew how fickle his people could be. Why not accommodate all faith, they asked?

Why not put all truth and beliefs on an equal footing so that no one can take offence? Now that the people have arrived at the Promised Land, it would be easy to appease local folks. Perhaps there would be benefits to serving other gods. The times were good...and dangerous. He urges the people not to give up their fire in their belly, their zeal for the Lord. He not only offers a choice in where they live, he offers them a choice of a god!

But Joshua offers them to choose Yahweh alone, the God who led them out of bondage into freedom and to the Promised Land. Likewise, to be a Christian means to put Christ first, and not to worship anything or anybody else. It means sacrificing many options. Christianity cannot be practiced on the edges of our lives, but only at the center. God wants converts, not adherents.

When you say “yes” to God, you have to say “no” to something else.

Jesus pressed hard decisions on would be disciples. He tested the depth of conviction or shallowness of adhesion. When the rich, young man was told, “Go, sell all you have, and follow me,” his adherence to Jesus quickly dried up.

What will be our choice concerning our commitment to God?

How shall we respond to God’s goodness to us? Shall we be loyal to the God whose love is steadfast toward us? More money was spent on lotteries last year than was given to charities. What god do we serve? In fact, far more money was spent on tickets to sporting events than was given to the work of God.

Are we carrying any idols?

Usually you hear me giving a financial stewardship sermon in the fall, however, it doesn't hurt to receive a reminding word from one of our faithful Biblical servants, such as Joshua, throughout the year. So, we have another choice to make. How shall we respond to God's grace and steadfast care?

Shall we give sacrificially? Can we tie our giving to a proportion of our income?

The choice we are making involves more than money. Which God do we serve? How can we be more faithful with our gifts? "Choose this day, whom you will serve," says Joshua to the Israelites and to us. "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." How about you?