

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

“Choose this Day whom you Will Serve . . . ”

12 November 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

“Military power wins battles, but spiritual power wins wars”

George C. Marshall (1880 - 1959).

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A quick perusal of the Bible should lay to rest threadbare allegations that stewardship is strictly about budgets. In fact, my best stewardship teachers have been discerning lay people who understood the weighty connection between what we profess and how we live out that profession. People who have mastered Christian stewardship principles know far too much than to confuse a congregation’s annual budget drive with a genuine biblical understanding of stewardship. Our stewardship reaches into every corner of our life of faith, which of course includes but is not limited to our purses. Billy Graham once said: “God has given us two hands—one to receive with and the other to give with.” So, I pray our faithfulness in all of these manifold gifts and graces God delivers to us! Hear the day’s lesson for 23rd Sunday after Pentecost:

24 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. 2 And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. 3 Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac . . .

14“Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.

15 Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” 16 Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; 17 for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; 18 and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore, we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”

19 But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. 20 If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” 21 And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!” 22 Then Joshua said to the

people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” 23 He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” 24 The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” 25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem (Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25).

The book of Joshua narrates the conquest of God’s land of promise, which later becomes what we know as Palestine. Last week Joshua began recounting Israel crossing the Jordan. The balance of the book of Joshua indulges us with stories of Joshua’s military accomplishments. With Joshua’s guidance Israel conquered the Palestinian hill country. Finally, the book of Joshua tells how Israel allots land to each tribe. Today’s lesson ends with Joshua’s concluding speech/sermon/address to Israel’s people.

Now for something completely different—In a possible mistranslation of a word in a story about Hernán Cortés, a great Spanish explorer, historians herald him for a great piece of leadership wisdom. In early historic documents we read that the boats of Cortes were breaking, *quebrando*. Thanks to some scribe’s bad handwriting early historians recounting the tale may have read the word as *quemando*, “burning.” Thus, these historic storytellers relate the apocryphal (fictional or legendary) story told and re-told about Cortes burning his ships in Veracruz, Mexico. He did so, as the story goes, so that his crew would neither mutiny nor flee. No going back, only pressing on. The Israelites faced a different, although similar prospect—no going back to Egypt.

During the forty-year wandering in the wilderness/desert, the Hebrews had learned—certainly in fits and starts—what it meant to worship Yahweh—the one true God. Yet, as they enter the land of promise, they encounter a number of other “gods” worshiped by the people who already lived there. Thus, Joshua’s challenge to the people: choose whom they will serve—once for all. Joshua’s challenge calls forth from them an ancient sort of “Pledge of Allegiance” or a confession approximating the “burning the boats!” “We will serve the Lord!”

In our verses 14-24, the last part of our text and lesson for the day, Joshua challenges Israel to serve Yahweh more than a dozen times. This excludes service to other “gods.” We might say that the First Commandment of the ten commandments indirectly combines all them. Augustine wrote: “Love God and do what you want” (paraphrase from a sermon on 1 John 4:4-12). That is, if you love God, you will want to live for God and follow God’s ways. Few gods of other nations or any gods with other names tempt us today, but as Luther made clear in his explanation of the First Commandment, anything one fears, loves, and trusts above everything else—whether that is riches, self, prestige, or whatever—is a person’s God. We are all capable of serving lesser gods. Our lesson translates “serve” which might mean “worship,” or “show loyalty toward,” or we could construe it also to mean “obey.”

Over the last thirty years I have re-read Dr. M. Scott Peck’s book: *The Road Less Traveled*. It is a “profoundly simple” book (how is the for an oxymoron?) Peck makes a number of thought-provoking points—among which is how to get our lives into manageable units and keep them manageable. It is a helpful book for anyone, particularly for parents of young children. In meeting with a group of young adults

looking for a meaningful curriculum for their Sunday school class, we settled on *The Road Less Traveled*. Its lessons are timeless. Here is one: “Life is difficult because it is a series of problems which beg to be resolved, but the resolution of them is painful.”

It is easier (at the moment) to ignore, deny, or otherwise defer dealing with problems. Most of us feel that if life were as it should be there would be no problems. We consider our difficulties to be a unique kind of affliction. Our idealized image of life is problem-free. We look at people we do not know very well and assume they have no problems because we do not see their problems. This gives us worry in that we feel that we are the only people on our side of the village with problems. Something must be wrong with us.

Peck writes: “When we teach ourselves and our children DISCIPLINE, we are teaching ourselves and our children how to . . . grow.” Peck writes about four tools of discipline. They are: delaying of gratification, acceptance of responsibility, dedication to the truth, and balancing. Life is difficult, but negotiable when we appropriate the right tools. I recommend the book to you.

God designates Christians by definition as stewards. This is because everything we manage God first gives us as a gift. We find our identity in God. Choose this day—and every day—whom you will serve. Who we think we are depends on it.

Several friends of Hendrik Kramer, the Dutch theologian, contacted him in 1939 in the Netherlands. They told him they were concerned because many of their Jewish friends were missing from their towns and villages. They asked Kramer what they ought to do. He said to them, “I cannot tell you what to do. But I can tell you who you are. If you know who you are, then you will know what to do.” His Dutch friends went out and organized the Resistance movement. As trials and temptations come to us, we need to remember who we are, and then we will know how to act and what to do. We are sinners saved by grace. Therefore, “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). If we know we are God’s people then we will become and grow into better and better stewards!

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