

Bread from the Old Testament: Serving  
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-25 & John 6:56-69  
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First Presbyterian, Luling

I may have disclosed this information before. I don't really enjoy much about cleaning house. I don't mind the dishes. I don't mind cleaning the kitchen every night, because I do love coming into a clean kitchen in the morning. It *almost* always stays clean while I'm asleep. *Almost* always. Other than that, nothing. I don't like sweeping or vacuuming or mopping or dusting or heaven forbid bathrooms. None of that regular cleaning that I clearly should be doing more often and more habitually than I do. Or somebody around our house should be. I have, at times, enjoyed the feeling of having a clean house. That is indeed a good feeling.

But here is the problem: that feeling does not last. The clean house does not last. Spiderwebs appear overnight. Doggy feet track in dirt and leaves and grass, at best. People leave their stuff lying about. Things get spilled and inadequately wiped up. Even if things don't start getting dirty immediately, I start to notice spots I missed, corners I've neglected, clutter collections I've ignored for so long I forgot to attend to them. Cleaning house is a never ending task, because the house never stays clean. It has to get done over and over and over again.

I could talk for five more minutes about yard work, which is the same thing. Laundry. Same thing. People wanting meals. Same thing. It turns out that much of life is like this. We can't accomplish something and mark it off our lists for ever and ever. What's done is done and can't be undone, maybe so. But so many things have to be done and re-done and re-done.

There's a joke that circulates among preachers that at most, each of us only has about five sermons. We preach the same five basic messages over and over again, with different scripture passages and different anecdotes surrounding them. Whether that's true or not, it points to a truth, and that is that faith is not any different from household chores in this regard. We have to do it over and over again. We have to make the same choices over and over again. We need to hear the same sermons and preach the same sermons and live the same sermons repeatedly. It's not that we backslide that quickly, or that's not all of the problem. It's that our lives move quickly, and our faith is affected by our lives, and we have to calibrate our faith to new realities and new challenges constantly.

Joshua gets this, and he's trying to get the Israelites to get it too. What we read today is a covenant renewal ceremony. This isn't the first time the Israelites have renewed the covenant with God. They've done it several times already, sometimes after they've broken their end of it spectacularly, but sometimes just because it's a turning point or a significant moment in their journey together. And that's what this is. Joshua is at the end of his life. They've reached the Promised Land. As they look toward settling in together, it's a good time to reevaluate and reconsider the promises they have made with the Lord.

Joshua first reminds them of all the Lord has done for the Israelite people, all the way back to God's choosing of Abraham. In the verses we skipped, there are more reminders and details about their ancestors, their liberation from Egypt, their conquest of the Promised Land, all at the Lord's leading and by the Lord's hand. Joshua reminds them that all of God's actions have brought them to this time and place. If not for the hand of God leading their ancestors, this generation of Israelites would not be enjoying the fulfillment of the promises God had made to Abraham.

Joshua then turns to the question. The basic question, at the deepest root, of the covenant. "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served...Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (24:14-15).

Well, when he puts it this way, there really isn't any choice. Given that recital of the Lord's great deeds and gracious mercy, the people respond quickly. "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord...therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God." In thanksgiving and gratitude and recognition for all God has done, the people recommit themselves to being servants of the Lord.

We might expect that Joshua has a rush of relief, that his sermon has been so well received and that people are responding to his altar call, and that they have understood the Lord's actions and presence in their lives and they will live accordingly. That is not at all how he responds, though.

He says, in effect: not so fast. It's not that easy. The Lord is a holy God, a jealous God. You can't just flippantly say, sure, we'll serve God. It's not so easy to set aside those other gods. And the Lord will not look kindly on unfaithfulness. The Lord isn't so easy to serve. This is a serious decision, Joshua says, take a minute and think it over. There are consequences and implications. Who will you serve?

The people respond again, "We will serve the Lord." They sound sure.

After a chapter's worth of teaching and conversation about Jesus being the bread of life and eating his flesh and drinking his blood, John tells us that many of the disciples said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" And many turn away and stop following Jesus. Jesus knows it is hard. Joshua knows it is hard. They just have to get the people to really understand.

Joshua doesn't take yes for an answer the second time either. He tries to explain again. You have to set aside the other gods you've been worshiping, and serve the Lord, the God of Israel alone. No other god was asking for their exclusive loyalty, only the Lord demanded that. Are you sure you can do that?

The Israelites respond again, "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey." Apparently this answer finally satisfies Joshua, and he finalizes the covenant renewal ceremony between the people and God.

Joshua asks them three times who they will serve. Jesus asks Peter three times, "do you love me?" When God asks us serious questions, God desires our serious consideration and answer, with a full understanding of the consequences to what we say.

And once we've answered that yes, we will follow where God leads, that's not a final answer. We have to answer that over and over and over. At every twist and turn in the road. At every change in our life circumstances. Probably it would be good to answer that question every morning when we wake up. Are you willing to serve God and follow where God leads you, even if it's hard to hear and hard to accept and hard to live out?

We find ourselves today at one of those points, I think. We as a congregation, you as a congregation, are at a change in circumstances. Are you willing to follow where God leads you, even when it is difficult or not what you yourselves would have chosen? And what about tomorrow and the day after that?

Choose this day whom you will serve. We will serve the Lord.