

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18      Bill Uetricht   8/22/24      14 Pentecost

(Bob Dylan's song "Gotta Serve Somebody" was sung.)

"You may be an ambassador to England or France. You may be the heavyweight champion of the world. You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls. But you are going to have to serve somebody."

Oh, not me. I am a proud, independent American. I don't serve anybody. I am my own boss. "You may be a state trooper; you might be a young Turk. You may be the head of some big TV network. You may be rich or poor; you may be blind or lame. But you are going to have to serve somebody."

You're *gonna* serve somebody. It's just the way life is. It may be the devil; it may be the Lord. But you're going to serve somebody. We all serve somebody.

Joshua is one of the most brutal books in the Bible. It chronicles the entrance of the people of God into the Promised Land, telling of the battles that occurred as they moved into the land. The book is gory and violent. It is not one of my favorites. It leaves me wondering about the people who are allegedly defeated by the people of God as they enter the land. Do they not matter? Are they, called the Amorites in today's reading, not children of God as well? Does it not count for anything that they have lived in that land for a long time?

And did these people all, as the reading today suggests, just roll over as the Israelites moved into the land? Joshua seems to think so. But you know how it works. Remembering your history is sometimes a matter of romanticizing it. We won *all* the battles. *All* our enemies were destroyed. Not so, according to the next book in the Bible, the book of Judges. This book tells us that there were people left, enemies who weren't conquered.

Well, anyway, this romantic telling of the entrance into the Promised Land brings us to where we are right now. Joshua is getting

old. He's about to die. He's done his job of leading his people into the new land. And now, it's time to recognize through a communal ritual the new situation that the Israelites find themselves in. So, Joshua brings everybody together and asks them to reaffirm who they are, to say "yes" once again to the covenantal relationship that Israel shares with God.

The evidence is relatively strong that Joshua was written not at the time of the entrance into the Promised Land, but many centuries later when the Babylonians brought havoc to the people of God and sent many of them off into exile. They were in a new land and in a new situation. What were they to do? The editor of Joshua does what a lot of religious text writers do. He takes them back to one of their ancient stories. In looking back, they will see what they are called to do in light of the new experience of exile. They are to affirm their commitment to the God of the covenant in this new, dark time.

So, as the story tells us, Joshua makes his case. He reminds his people in a portion of the text left out today, of all the things God has done for them. And after this long recital, he says, "Now, therefore," after all that God has done for you, "put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether that be the false gods your ancestors served in the ancient lands or the false gods that the folks in the lands you have just entered are serving. As for me and my house, 'We will serve the Lord.'"

Having stacked the deck, Joshua is saying that it's no-brainer. He and his household are going to serve the Lord; they will lead the way for the people of Israel.

As you listen to Joshua, you get the sense that he is saying, “You gotta serve somebody. You’re going to serve somebody. It may be the devil or may be the Lord, but you are going to serve somebody.”

Many people think that the primary purpose of religion is to get people to behave. Now I personally think that good behavior is a worthy goal of religion. I wonder if the lack of civility that we are experiencing in our culture today is in part a consequence of fewer people participating in organized religion, since some organized religion can serve the conservative task of making people gentler and more thoughtful, although I admit that some of the most uncivil people can be religious people.

Nevertheless, the primary concern of Biblical religion is not morality (behavior), but idolatry. Perhaps you note that the first commandment is not “Behave.” No, it’s “No other gods.” Where we place our hearts, what is at the center of our lives, what matters most to us, what or whom we serve—these are the primary concerns of Biblical religion. And these are the concerns that face us in every new situation. Whenever we enter a new land, we are faced with the choice of whom we will serve: either the gods of the Amorites or the gods of the Egyptians, or the God named Yahweh, the one who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

You gotta serve somebody. You’re gonna serve somebody. You live in the land of illusion, if you think that you don’t serve anybody, that nothing is going to control you, that you are the master of your own fate. You are gonna serve somebody. It may be the Lord, or it may be the devil, but you are going to serve somebody.

Joshua thinks it is worth your while to serve the God who set you free, the God who led you out of the hands of the Egyptians. One of the things about false gods is that they tend not to set you free. In fact, that is when you know a god is false. It entangles you. Leaders, things, ideas

that are not worthy of being called “god” often entangle people, make them not free.

People in cults experience this. Folks with addictions discover this. I personally think that those who have lived with addictions and have come through them to a healthier place are some of the most profound people, because they recognize how false gods can lead them not to freedom, but to slavery. Not acknowledging that in one way or the other we will serve somebody, we end up serving somebody or some thing. Before we know it, leaders, ideas, substances are controlling our lives. Before we know it, Amazon and the packages it delivers is controlling our lives. Before we know it, money and the stuff it brings us is calling the shots. And the consequences aren't always pretty. Hoarding is just the most dramatic of the consequences.

My experience is that anxiety is one of the most common consequences of the control that money and stuff have in our lives. Something I have noted is that some people with loads of money also have loads of anxiety. You think that more money is going to take care of anxiety. But sometimes, it multiplies it. Why? Because we end up serving it. And money doesn't have the power to set us free. Sometimes it simply entangles us, makes us more anxious.

Bev and I when I was in seminary worked for some people who had loads of money. One of their young boys, whom we babysat regularly, constantly went to the entrance closet to make sure that the security system had been turned on. How many times do you need to check that? I wanted to scream. It's on. Children victims of anxiety.

Pay attention when you make money your god. It is not going to come through for you as you think it will. It may just bring you an enormous amount of anxiety. Money is not worthy of our serving it.

Our gospel reading for today from John reveals a struggle around whom to serve, whom to follow. John is convinced that something new,

something very much connected to the God who sets us free has occurred in the person of Jesus. But many in his community are getting cold feet about following Jesus. They are withdrawing from the movement. John is convinced that Jesus is worth following, that in him there is freedom, in him we discover the words of eternal life, the really good life, the unencumbered life. To serve Jesus is to serve the movement of freedom. And the freedom that is centered in Jesus is a freedom that looks like love and is love.

Real love sets people free. Love began it all. Love is the truth in the middle of it all. Love is what will win at the end. To follow Jesus is to be captured by and preoccupied with love. To follow Jesus is to serve love.

So, I say to you. Choose this day whom you are going to serve because you gotta serve somebody. Will it be the gods that entangle you, that turn you into slaves? Or will it be the God of love, the God of freedom? As for me and my house, love and freedom seem much more appealing. We're going to serve the Lord and pray that Jesus will lead the way.