

“Deal or No Deal?”

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

November 9, 2020

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-24 ~ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 ~ Matthew 25:1-13

Almost every pastor feels the pressure of making institutional size the single overriding priority of their tenure. The overriding question of every search committee is, “What do you plan to do to grow this church?” Several years ago, I went to a small group leadership training workshop at Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, IL. It is one of the mega churches that we hear so much about with a membership of around 10,000 members. It has its own shopping mall, food court, a Starbucks, a variety of intramural sports teams, weight reduction classes ... you name it ... they’ve got it. I did learn a lot about small group Bible study there, but I left with a somewhat uncomfortable feeling about the consumer mentality people seem to have about church. I hope we continue to grow, but I want Oakland Christian UCC to be a gospel-driven rather than market-driven church. I do long for new members, and I am thrilled that those five wonderful young people were confirmed today.

But every church, including our own, has difficult choices to make about how to make the gospel relevant to its own generation without selling out the gospel to the

entertainment and consumer values of its culture. It's natural for us to want the church to serve us rather than us serving the church ... to want God to serve us rather than expecting anything from us.

All of this leads me to ask how we make the choices we do in life ... not just about what church we will join ... but what we will do ... whom we will marry ... how we will spend our money and our time. A few years ago I read the book Into Thin Air about a climb of Mt. Everest in 1996 which turned catastrophic when eight climbers were killed and several others were stranded by a rogue storm. What struck me was the effect of small choices ... each seemingly insignificant ... which spelled disaster. Every choice we make might matter more than we realize. I believe we do have a genuine freedom to make choices, though our choices are limited by many factors, including our genes and our conditioning. Our gospel today reminds us how choices we make can limit the choices we have later ... and that the time comes when it is too late to choose otherwise.

We need to make our choices carefully, but we can't wait too long to choose. I am 69 years old. I like to think I am in my prime at midlife. But who am I kidding? I don't know too many 138 year-olds! I'm at that point where my body reminds me that the clock is ticking. And while there is much I still want to do, it is definitely too late for some things. You won't see me climbing Mt. Everest any time soon. But a funny thing happens to you as you age. Suddenly you realize that the

institutions you once counted upon your parents and elders to sustain (and criticized them for the poor job they were doing) are on your shoulders now. It's our turn. Our choices will have a dramatic impact on our children and the generations to follow. Can we do any better? Will we leave a good legacy for those who are coming after?

Joshua had joined the journey Israel made across the wilderness in search of God's promise. Suddenly the mantle of Moses fell upon his shoulders. Can you imagine succeeding Moses as the leader of God's people? And now the work of claiming the "promised land" fell to him to lead. Joshua gathered the tribes of Israel ... along with some folks who had joined them during their wilderness wanderings ... along with the inhabitants of the land they had conquered. Joshua reviewed the events which had brought them this far. He remembered the covenant God had made with them at Mt. Sinai. "You will be my people, and I will be your God." And he gave the people a choice: *"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."* (Joshua 24:15).

Joshua was magnanimous in including all these outsiders in the invitation. All of them had an opportunity to join the people of God. He was remarkably inclusive, especially considering that not long before these people had killed his own in fierce

battles. It isn't easy to make friends with your enemies, especially when blood has been shed. Then again, Joshua and the Israelites had won. They could afford to be magnanimous, and one might question whether the outsiders had any real choice here at all. It was clear enough who was in charge at the moment. It's not so hard to follow God publicly when that is the popular thing ... even the necessary thing to do.

And it wouldn't be long before Israel and the outsiders alike would be challenged *again* in their loyalties ... tempted to worship other gods when it was more profitable or popular to do that. They would soon begin to worship Israel's God on the Sabbath ... and the native fertility gods the rest of the week. After all, the Baals were responsible for the produce of the land. It was just good business, and not so different from *our* own tendency to divide our loyalties between the God we meet in Jesus Christ here on Sundays ... and the gods we serve in our work and play the rest of the week. We do it without much thought because we may not give God much thought when we aren't here.

Perhaps that's why Joshua wasn't satisfied when the people answered in one voice like so many sheep: *"Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods. We also will serve the Lord, for he is our God"* (Joshua 24:16, 18).

Almost comically, after inviting them to say just this, he says, *"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. 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"*

(Joshua 24:19-20). He really doesn't sugar coat it, does he? In our zeal to call people to the glorious adventure of faith, we are tempted to make the gospel too easy and leave out some of the costlier provisions.

One of the surprising themes of the gospels is how often Jesus turned people away from following him who weren't willing to pay the price he demanded. He turned away a man who had great wealth and wasn't willing to let go of giving it first place in his life. It wasn't just about greed, but about self-definition. Who am I if I am not a rich man? Jesus turned away a man who wanted to postpone the decision until he could fulfill his family duty to stay home until his father died. "First things first," Jesus told him. Every minister knows if you want to draw a crowd nothing works like food, but Jesus turned away a multitude who wanted him to feed them again. He refused to do miracles on demand. He resisted the temptation to do whatever it would take to get people to follow him. Instead, he talked about sacrifice and social justice. He invited people to leave the known behind ...to let go of the familiar security... to let go of their paralyzing fear ... and to embark on a new adventure in life. He spoke of the dominion of God as the pearl of great price, worth sacrificing everything to gain.

*"If any want to become my followers," he said, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it"* (Mark 8:34-35). Hard words yes, but Jesus offered them a clear choice. Like Joshua, Jesus left no one out of his invitation to grace and life in relationship with God. But he didn't offer an easy path of prosperous security. His gospel was not something you add to a rich full life of serving many gods. It was a primary choice ... that everything else you say and do and spend would be in service to the one true God. It meant reward beyond measuring. It meant a radical change of identity and point of view. It was a clear, but difficult choice.

Joshua was right to caution the people about following this God. We can't serve the Lord our God, not completely, not whole heartedly. We are too divided ... too afraid ... too weak to be the disciples we ought to be. But let's be honest with ourselves about that ... and trust in God's grace where we are weak.

The temptations of the world are great, but if we begin by being honest with ourselves ... by the grace of God day by day and piece by piece ... we can make better choices ... we can become better disciples ... we can give him a little more of ourselves on the way to loving the Lord our God with all our hearts and with all our minds and with all our soul and with all our strength.

A wise rabbi once told his disciples, "We must each free ourselves of Egypt every day." To put it another way, when you make the one great choice ... the choice that really matters ... the choice that is supposed to determine all other choices you will ever make ... when you decide to become a follower of Jesus Christ and to serve him into life abundant and eternal and join the church ... you have not made "a happily ever after" decision ... but a new beginning. Every day ... several times a day ... in every choice we make ... we choose to follow Christ or not. We are called to choose him again, in specific and measurable ways. He takes us just as we are, but refuses leave us as we are. He asks us for more so that he can give us more of the stuff that makes for life. Therefore, I invite you again today, in the name of Jesus Christ, choose this day whom you will serve, whether it will be the gods of your own selfish will ... or the gods of our culture which are so tempting in their offers ... or the one true God who alone has the words that make for an eternal life. But as for me and my house - God help us - we will serve the Lord. May we pray?

Sovereign God, who alone offers us the words of life,

We confess that we are weak. We would change our world, but we have a hard time even changing ourselves. We would promise to serve you alone, but we are divided and afraid. We persistently choose security instead of faith, wealth instead of riches, power instead of relationship. We are bombarded with invitations to

measure our worth by what we own, our power by whom we hurt, and our lives by what we receive rather than what we give. Forgive us, and make us today a little more loving, a little more forgiving, a lot more generous out of our gratitude for all you have given us. Help us to give you more of ourselves day by day - this day - that we may gain more of you and even more importantly extend your reign of justice and peace farther in our world by letting you rule more completely over our own lives for Jesus sake. Amen.