

**"Choose This Day"**  
**Sermon for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Lectionary Year A**  
**November 9, 2008**  
**Text: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25**  
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And Joshua says to the people, "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."

You may remember the television mini-series *The Thorn Birds* that was presented a few years ago. Set in Australia, it is the story of a Catholic priest, Father Ralph, played by Richard Chamberlain, and the struggle he has between his faithful devotion to the church and his passionate love for the beautiful Meggie, played by Rachel Ward. At one point in the story, Father Ralph leaves Australia in order to escape his deep feelings for Meggie. He goes to Rome to be in the service of a certain cardinal, played by Christopher Plummer. Father Ralph confesses his love for Meggie to the cardinal, and the priest also shares with his superior how glad he is not to be having to deal any longer with the competing loyalties that have divided his heart, mind, and soul for so long.

The priest, then, is quite shocked when the cardinal, some time later, insists that Father Ralph return to Australia, to resume his duties as the parish priest where Meggie lives. Father Ralph begs the cardinal not to send him there. The priest protests the assignment strongly,

saying to the cardinal, "You are asking me to fail." "No, not at all, my son," replies the wise cardinal. "I am asking you to choose." So it was with Joshua. He was asking the people to choose. So it is with us this morning. We are being asked to choose. Choose this day whom you will serve.

*Faith requires making a choice.* Saying yes to the one, true God means saying no to all other, lesser gods. We cannot serve two masters. There is only one ultimate loyalty we can demonstrate. Notice please from this passage of scripture that God did not eliminate the choice of gods for the Hebrew people. God allowed them to have options from which to make a choice. There were the gods of their ancestors, the good old gods of yesterday. And there were the gods of the Amorites, the gods everyone else in the neighborhood was worshiping, the popular gods, the politically correct gods, the gods you needed to worship if you wanted to go along with the crowd. These were the choices.

God did not go out of his way to make things simple for his people. He never does. We must choose; we must make choices, and they are not always easy choices to make. God allows other gods to compete with him for our attention, our time, our talent, our commitment, our resources, our energy, our devotion, our money, our faith.

In the days of Joshua it was particularly the gods of the Amorites who were always present, always available, always attractive, always tempting. In our day, the gods go by other names—names like power, prestige, status, position, control, material possessions, success, upward mobility, and instant gratification. Even if we manage not to bow down and worship these gods, *there is always the danger of substituting some*

*good thing for the best thing*, the most difficult choice of all. So we can allow ourselves, our families, our jobs, our hobbies, our civic duties, or even our recreational pursuits to become that which claims our ultimate loyalty and devotion. We easily can let something good become our god. We are still surrounded by gods, and we are still asked to make a choice. Choose this day whom you will serve.

We are being asked in particular at this time of year to make a choice with respect to our money, a decision as to how we will spend our money in 2009. We are being asked to choose right now whom we will serve next year by deciding how much of our money we will estimate giving to the church. In addition to upholding the church in 2009 with our money, we are also being asked to renew our membership vows, our covenant agreement with God and this congregation, by promising to uphold the church with our prayers, our attendance, and our volunteer service to the ministries of the church.

But I want to talk specifically about the stewardship of money and how the choices we make concerning the use of our money have an impact on our faith. I have a friend who says that stewardship is faith's bottom line, and I think he is right. Stewardship *is* faith's bottom line. Stewardship is where the rubber meets the road for our faith. And let's be honest. If we were to take a hard look at our checkbooks, we would find out in a hurry which gods we are serving. It's certainly true for me. *Our values and our priorities wind up becoming readily apparent in the ways we choose to spend our money.*

None of us has all the money we want. There is simply not enough money to do everything we would like to do. If there were, we would not

have to make difficult choices as to how to spend it. As always has been the case, there are so many choices which we can make, because we live between competing claims on our lives. So like Joshua did to the people of his day, I'm asking you to make a choice. I'm asking you to choose the church and let it be that to which you give the best of yourself and your resources. In asking you to uphold the church, it is my claim, be it ever so bold, that to do so is to ask you to make the choice for God and thus, the choice for life.

I know that is a bold claim indeed. By making that claim, that to choose the church is to choose God, I am certainly not suggesting that God's activity in the world is limited to the church in general or this congregation in particular. God's will is not solely dependent on Schreiber Memorial United Methodist Church.

However, I believe with all my heart that God has put this particular congregation here and allowed us to continue to be here for a reason. We are here to serve, to serve God as we seek to serve all those in need around us. I feel that we have a singular, unique, and special place of service in this community. We are a church like no other, a home for people who very well might not find a home in another congregation. I have heard from many of you how this is the best church you have ever been a part of.

Sure, this church is not the only game in town. It is not the only service organization. It is not the only educational institution. It is not the only place where programs for children and youth are planned and carried out. It is not the only opportunity there is for fellowship. But the church is the only place in town where all these things are done in the

name and in the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ. When it is at its best, the church is the only place where the unconditional love of God in Christ is offered. The church is the only place where we operate out of grace and not merit and reward. The church is where genuine community, real caring, and authentic concern are practiced. It may well be the only place in our world where true equality can be experienced. *The church certainly is the only place completely dedicated to the nurturing of the whole person—body, mind, and spirit.*

It is only in this place where the soul is taken as seriously as it needs to be. It is in this place where honesty, integrity, and morality are still lifted up as virtues for all of us to demonstrate. In a world where values seem to mean less and less, there is a desperate need for what the church, and only the church, can and should be doing in the world. Above all else, the church is here so that hope—real hope, solid hope, foundational hope—can be offered to those of us whose situations seem hopeless at times. I think it is no exaggeration to say that *the life of our community depends on the life of our church, and the life of our church depends on our commitment to it.*

So we must choose, and choose wisely, because the choice for God is always a choice between life and death. We must choose what to do with our money, because the choice to support the church is a choice between life and death. The choice of the church is not the most attractive choice, and it doesn't always seem like the smart thing to do. If we are honest enough to admit it, all of us at times have questioned the wisdom of giving to the church when the money could be spent on other, more appealing things. But you realize, I'm sure, that the right

choice, the correct choice, the choice most in line with God's way and will, is not always the choice that looks the best, feels the best, and makes the most sense.

In the third of the Indiana Jones movies, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, you will remember the scene near the end of the movie, when Indiana finally has made his way into the chamber which holds the Holy Grail, the cup of Christ. By this time, Professor Jones desperately needs to find the grail and to use it to administer living water to his father, the older Dr. Jones, played in the movie by Sean Connery, who is mortally wounded and will die unless his wounds receive the benefit of the healing that only drinking from the grail can make possible.

But if you recall, the room in which the Holy Grail is kept is a room full of grails. There is more than one, many more. As the ancient knight guarding the grail explains, the right one might be chosen from all the possibilities. Indiana is not the first one in the room to make a choice. The wealthy and greedy fortune hunter who has underwritten Jones' quest for the grail spies one of the cups he naturally assumes is the correct one. It is an immense golden goblet, magnificently ornate, encrusted with jewels. It is spectacular, a vessel worthy of the King of Kings. The fortune hunter uses this cup to drink from the fountain in the center of the room. Immediately he is struck dead, engulfed in the flames of his own misguided and ultimately self-destructive values. He melts into a heap of ashes as the old knight proclaims, "He has chosen poorly."

Then it is Indiana's turn. He surveys all the chalices, all his choices. His eyes come upon a simple, plain and ordinary cup, there in the

back, so easily overlooked. It is not gold. It is not large. There are no sparkling jewels on it. "Now there is the cup of a carpenter," pronounces Dr. Jones. Sure enough, he is right. He drinks from the fountain of life and is unharmed. He shares the fountain's water with his father, and he is healed, saved, given new life, a new beginning.

I believe we have the same choice today with respect to God, with respect to ourselves, and with respect to our church. We can choose new life, a new beginning for the ministry of Christ that this church alone can provide for ourselves and our community. *And this church can do its ministry only with your help.*

I have not been able to say this to every congregation I have served, but I can say it to you here at Schreiber. I know you will make the right choice, because you always have. You always have chosen to do your very best when it comes to supporting the church. That's the reason Schreiber is still here and still strong. So choose this day to do what you know to do and what you have done in the past and what you will continue to do in the future: serve the Lord your God by giving as much of your money as you can to the church.