The Shechem Assembly

JOSHUA 24:1-3a, 14-25 (NRSVUE) ***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. 2And 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. 3Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. …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. 15Now 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." 16Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, 17for 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, 18and 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." 19But 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. 20If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good." 21And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the Lord!" 22Then 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." 23He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." 24The people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey." 25So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.***

The Word of God for the people of God:

There are three Sundays left in this Church year, and each lectionary reading focuses on ultimate commitment or speaks in parables about a hero who has been delayed in an anticipated return. Many elements of the church have interpreted these parables literally to imply a physical return of Jesus. In theological terms it's called eschatology, and I hope you recall it means a concern about "end things" or "end times:" end, not necessarily as in last or final, but as in purpose or goal, and its application is not restricted to some unknown future time or to one distinct event. Whenever we see instances of God's will and purpose being done—whenever we see the Spirit of Christ in action—those moments are "end times."

New Testament scholar, Gene Boring, says the whole New Testament should be read eschatologically—it's all about a community of faith being directed toward the accomplishment of God's intended goal and purpose.

I notice a similarity between eschatology and football, in which each offensive drive is an eschatological effort to score a touchdown.

In today's reading from Joshua, God has just scored a touchdown. Israel has possessed its Promised land as God had promised. And, yes, I have trouble with the

way that went down. Looking back through the lens of Jesus of Nazareth, I believe the Israelites misunderstood God's strategy for possessing the Promised Land. And, by extension, when the current state of Israel was established in 1948, I have *similar* problems, with the same reasons, with the way that went down.

I do not find evidence of God's will and purpose in any violent displacement of whole populations from their ancestral homes and, yes, that includes the American Indian. In a very real sense, the events of 1948 are at the root of what's going on in Gaza today. It's more complicated than that, and if you have problems with my position, come to me. Let's talk.

But in the Joshua narrative, God just scored a touchdown: God's promise was fulfilled, even if Israel's strategy was inconsistent with God's nature and will. The twelve tribes have been assigned their respective regions, and Joshua has called a family meeting: it's been called "The Shechem Assembly." In essence, he says,

> ***"Here's what you're going to encounter in this new land: there are gods and goddesses everywhere. But remember YHWH, the God who brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery… If you are unwilling to serve YHWH, choose this day whom you will serve, … but as for me and my household, we will serve YHWH."***

My initial idea was the theme and title, "choose." There are multiple things in our own lives that compete with God for our time, energy and resources. Each of us, I suspect, could make a list. I have list, and it's tempting to impose it on you and tell you what you must choose. I've heard a ton of sermons that do that.

On the second night of our recent trip to visit our extended family, we stopped for dinner at "Skeet's Grill" in Sweetwater, Texas. On the back of the servers' T-shirts was written, "We will serve, (Joshua 24:15)." That got my attention, and I thought about changing the sermon title from "Choose" to "Serve."

When we go to California, I'm still on Arkansas time, so I get up in the morning a couple of hours before everyone else, and I spend that time meditating and writing. On our first morning there I kept thinking about those T-shirts, so I read the text again, several times, going back a couple of chapters and reading a couple of chapters beyond the text, to get the context.

It struck me that in the text, it's not an either/or dichotomy: choose or serve. It's not both/and; rather, it's one thought: "Choose … whom you will serve."

I'm not sure there's ever been a really clear definition of what it means to serve God. If it were, the choice would be clearer. Through most of Christian history we've been unable to find the pattern that connects all the dots, even though it's been given to us fully in Jesus. John Rohr says, "We worshipped Jesus instead of following him on his same path. We made Jesus into a mere religion instead of a journey toward union with God and everything else. This shift made us into a

religion of 'belonging and believing' instead of a religion of transformation."[1]

What if we could somehow transform some of those things that complete with our commitment to God—what if we could transform them into ways of serving God? What if you already are serving God, and just not aware of it?

When I served at Harvard Avenue Christian Church in Tulsa, one of my responsibilities was to create a support system for our volunteers. I recruited a support team (we didn't call it a "committee," because that word sometimes conjures up images of meaningless meetings and busy work.) Charles Kettering said, "If you want to kill any idea in the world, get a committee working on it." Somebody else defined a camel as "a horse put together by a committee."

Which is why it was so important that the Relaunch of our presence in this community be grounded in a process of discernment built on six weeks of praying, "God, what do you want to accomplish through us?" We have discerned a clear vision of what God is calling us to do and be, and our goals are clear.

Anyway, our Volunteer Support Team spent a year studying the emerging Business Model called Volunteer Management. We read books. We interviewed the late Marlene Wilson, who was a prominently know trainer and consultant and was involved in the formation of the Department of Volunteer Management at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Our first event was to create a "Volunteer Ministry Recognition Sunday" to acknowledge with gratitude all those who volunteered in the church. But, in our preparation, we also surveyed the congregation to determine all the ways people were volunteering in the community, and we found ways to acknowledge those volunteered hours as extensions of the church's presence in the community.

Is not volunteering at Soul Food Café a way of choosing to serve the Lord? The choice to serve on the School Board can be a way of choosing to serve the Lord by working to build and support a system to maximize the potential of children and youth; or, as we also have seen, it can be a choice to remove the element of choice by inflicting a narrow sectarian religious ideology on the broader community, with no apparent thought or effort directed toward maximizing potential.

Participating in a community music or theater group can be an opportunity to choose to be a Christian presence among other volunteers.

The list is limitless: civic clubs, Scouting, school extracurricular activities, Presidential Library Docent, Board of Directors of an affordable housing development, band parent, retired teacher service group,

[1] Adapted from *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*, p. 23; and *A New Way of Seeing, a New Way of Being: Jesus and Paul*.

We can choose to serve the Lord in so many ways and in so many venues in and beyond the church. It may be a matter of awareness: how can I choose to turn secular things into an awareness of prioritizing God things… Serving God is not a burden (again, sometimes serving church can be a burden if goals and purposes are not clear, but serving God is never a burden, and we need to discern the difference…