

## **Joshua 24:14-15**

‘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. 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.’

### **“The Only Vote that Counts”**

**Rev. Charles Schuster**

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The drill sergeant always demanded the best, saw the new recruits, first time they'd had on their uniforms. They didn't look so good. Their shoes weren't shined, their shirts hadn't been pressed right, they were sloppy, yes. And the sergeant was speechless as anger grew, and frustration, and he called them out, and he said, “Men and women, I want you to step out here and take a good look at yourselves.” I thought that was funnier than you did.

Ann Landers a few years ago, had taken insurance company reports of accidents that had happened in the justification to try and get a claim, excuses... “As I approached the intersection, a stop sign suddenly appeared in a place where no stop sign had ever appeared before, and I was unable to stop in time to avoid the accident.” Excuse. “An invisible car came out of nowhere and struck my vehicle and vanished.” “The pedestrian had no idea which direction to go, so I hit him.” Actually, that one's not funny, though I thought it was too.

So this morning on this Commitment Sunday, we stop making excuses and we step out and take a look at ourselves. And to help us do that, we turn to the verse in the Bible, that's the second verse in the Bible that Ray read, the first one was “Oh my goodness,” and “God will afflict”. If you've got a sermon for that one, tell you what, it's all yours. I don't know about that one. I'll bet he does, and he'll do really well with it. It's Joshua at Shechem, there's not particular historical record of this. Something perhaps happened at some point in their history, but it became a ritual that they would renew. Joshua at Shechem, saying to his people and I think, to some extent, saying to us, “Worship God in total commitment. Get rid of the gods your ancestors worshipped, because they worshipped on the far side of the river. Choose this day whom you will serve. Worship God. As for me and my family, we will worship God.” On commitment Sunday, we will worship God. It's the only vote that counts, but what does that mean? We will worship God. Choose this day whom you will serve. What does it mean to serve and worship God? Today we step out and take a look at ourselves.

It's an easy thing to say, we will worship God, but what does it mean? I think it means a lot of different things, but I've picked out two things for you to consider. First of all, it means God is God of our lives. The God we worship is the God of our lives, and that says a whole lot more than you think it does, I hope. To follow God is a choice, it is a decision

that is personal. Albert Camus the existentialist philosopher was right when he said. "Life is the sum of all of our choices." You and I have to choose. God is the God of our lives. In other words, we don't serve the God of our parents exactly as they did. We don't worship their God and call it ours. They were on the far side of the river, we're on the near side of the river. There's more water under their bridge. There are different experiences that they've had. The God they worship was the God that was right for them. They shared their God with us, but the God we serve has to be right for us.

John Grogan needs to learn this. John Grogan is best known for his book *Marley & Me*. It's a book about his dog, Marley. It's a great book. If you read it, it'll make you cry and it'll make you laugh. But he's written a new book, entitled *The Longest Trip Home*. It's about his childhood, it's about his parents' death. The saddest chapter in that book, though part of it will make you laugh and part of it will make you cry, the saddest chapter in that book is the chapter with the story of his father's funeral. This is what he says.

"There was a group at the funeral I had not known about. It was a group of men, most of them about my age, part of a men's prayer group my father had started. Thirty of them showed up in matching dark suits and were pallbearers. It was instantly obvious that my father had meant a great deal to them. It was painful in a way, because I saw in them the son he surely wished I could have been, the kind who embraced and shared his reverence and devotion. As, one by one, they filed by in the receiving line, shaking my hand and telling me how much they had admired my father and what a spiritual inspiration he had been to them, I could not help feeling my own failings." John Grogan, and all the John Grogans of the world, and all of us, to some extent.

Jess Lair, he was right when he said, "You don't raise kids, you raise carrots. You sponsor kids." Our parents sponsored us, but there was a time when we went out on our own. Our parents shared with us their thoughts, but we formed our own ideas. Our parents gave us life so we could live our own lives, and John Grogan's father was spiritual. But John Grogan is inspired as well, and in his own way was spiritual, but not like his father. Our parents taught us what they knew, they shared with us their faith, they gave us our beginning. It was a start, but it was their faith, and if we are to serve God, if God is the God of our lives, we have to choose.

Sue Monk Kidd wrote a book, *Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, and in that book you can see the struggle she had with her background, with her heritage, and with her parents' religion. And she came to realize that her faith, though she honored her parents in their faith, was not theirs. She says this in her book *First Light*. "I slip out into the star-filled night alone. I look up. Tonight is the night I begin to see the grandeur of the heavens, the sky jeweled with countless twinkling lanterns. In the timeless constellations I see God's signature. In the night wind I feel its touch. In the whisper of leaves I hear the song. Just like that, my soul wakes up. Once more, for me, the universe is crammed with God."

In every one of us lies the potential to wake up and experience God so real, so clear, so personal and so close. In every one of us there is a time to choose when God is more than just the word we speak. When following God is more than a phrase we offer in a unison

prayer in a church service. Faith is not an inheritance, it's a choice. It can be suggested but it can't be compelled. It can be bottled but it can't be replicated. Every younger generation has to find its own way, worship its own God, discover its own truth, and elect its own President.

Joan Borysenko in her book *The Soul's Compass*, tells us every religion has moral guidelines, a kind of one-fits-all sort of prescription for living the good life, and those precepts are helpful, as far as they go, but spiritual guidance provides a more personal level of direction that speaks exactly to who we are, and to what we need. God is a direction, a presence, an organizing principle in our lives, and there is a choice we make. The God of Jesus was not the God of Mary and Joseph. The God of Paul the Apostle was not exactly the God of Jesus. Choose this day whom you will serve. Not the God of your parents, which they worshipped on the far side of the river. God is God in your life, and that is what you serve, and it's a choice. It's a vote. It's the only vote that counts.

What does it mean to serve God? Well, first of all, I think it is personal and particular, like I've been trying to say. And secondly, it is merciful and meaningful. God is good, all the time. God is good all the time. James Moore likes to tell the story of the farmer who went to the government bureaucrat who specialized in animal health. The farmer told the expert that ten of his chickens had died, and the expert instructed the farmer to give aspirin to the survivors. Two days later the farmer returned. Twenty more chickens died. The expert said to give the rest of them castor oil. Two days later the farmer came back and reported thirty more chickens had died, and the expert strongly recommended penicillin. Two days later the farmer showed up. All the chickens had died. And the expert said, "Too bad. I had lots more remedies."

Theologians and preachers have lots of explanations for what happens when things happen that shouldn't. "It is the will of God. You must have sinned, it's judgment. God is trying to tell you something." Remedies – lots of them. But there's only one that works, I think. It's the one about mercy and meaning. It's the one that begins, God is good, God is good all the time.

A good friend of mine, Harvey Martz, he's the pastor of Saint Andrew United Methodist Church. He and Judy have had their share of joy in their lives, but like any of us, they've had a measure of sadness. They have a son who has Down Syndrome, but that young man has been such an inspiration and his story is so compelling that there's a Hollywood movie studio a few years ago wanted to make a movie on his life. Recently, Rev. Martz was discovered to have a brain tumor, and faced major surgery. He has had that surgery and has come through it well. But before the surgery, he wrote his congregation in their newsletter the following message, that in effect is saying to them, "God is good, all the time." He wrote,

"I don't believe for a second that God sends brain tumors or illness or disasters or tragedies to afflict people with. Anomalies happen. Accidents happen. Suffering happens. Bad things happen. Our faith does not prevent difficulties or suffering. Our faith lets us find healing and hope and new life in the midst of suffering. God is in the health

professionals who have dedicated their lives to be instruments of God's wellness and wholeness. God is on the side of healing and wellness, and God is at work in bringing good out of the very darkest of circumstances. God is in the incredible outpouring of love and concern that you have shown Judy and me these past few days. In all life's circumstances, God is with us to see us through the circumstances with peace and power and comfort and strength. God is good all the time."

Louise and Rae Batch – Rae is one of the Stompers, you know Louise, many of you – they were having a conversation not too long ago. Several of you know that some months ago, Louise had a stroke. It was a very serious stroke, but she's come back heroically from that. She discovered a couple of weeks ago that there is a need for a major surgery again, a different issue, but major surgery. And they were talking and Louise said to Rae, "You know, it just isn't fair, and I don't want to blame God." And Rae said, "Well, if we don't want to blame God, who should we blame? Because you're right, it just isn't fair." And Louise looked at Rae with that wonderful twinkle in her eye, and she said, "I know, let's blame it on the Russians." So we'll blame it on the Russians. But we don't blame it on God. God is good all the time.

Paul the Apostle said, "This is the good news. God's grace is sufficient." If we expect good things to happen, then we can see them when they do. If we believe God is at work doing good, then we become God's agents, and the good things get better, and the better things become the best. And when bad things happen, we don't need to think of God as the cause, but rather we can use God's power to get out of it. There is no captivity that doesn't lend itself to some introspection, and there is no solitary confinement that cannot be transformed into spiritual solitude. No one can enslave us if our spirits are always freed by the God who is always good. No life-threatening disease can strip us of the life-giving power that knows how health and healing are always possible some way, somehow. That's why *Tuesdays With Morrie* was such an inspirational book, and hearing Morrie say, "These days of illness are the best days of my life," and he's dying of ALS. And that's the reason the *Diary of Anne Frank* gives us such courage, where Anne Frank writes, "I believe on the basis of it, at the core of it, the human heart, everybody is good." That's the reason we honor veterans who fought and died for our freedom, because we do not want to take for granted the good life, or take for granted the freedom that we have. For in sickness we are healed, in death we are resurrected, in poverty we are enriched, in the worst of days we remember the better days gone by and expect good times to return.

God is good. When the casket closes, and the cross is lifted, and the tomb is sealed, when the table is prepared, when the manger is filled with swaddling clothes, God is good. God is good all the time. We serve God. It's a vote. It's a choice. It's the only vote that counts. This morning I want you to step out here and take a good look at yourselves. I cannot say on this commitment Sunday that the measure of your serving God is reflected in the support for the church, absolutely, because there are lots of ways to serve God. This is one of them. But I will say this. My job on the staff is to do what I can to do everything that is possible to make sure this church is one of the places you can go to serve God, the God you follow, who is always good. Let this church be worthy, as a place that you can cast your lot, to take your stand, in the only vote that counts. Let us pray.

In the promise we make, in the table to which we are invited, may there be something here in this room that takes us out of here, to the world, to do God's will. O God, the God we serve, O God, the good that you create for us and through us, bless this church. Confront this church. Lead this church, and may we all vote "Yes" in the only vote that counts. Amen.

Some of the most important things said in a person's life are those things that we say when we know it's the last time we'll get to see each other, and that moment in Jesus' life when he met with his friends at the table, and he broke the bread and he said, "This is my body, broken for you, take this, feed on this in your heart by faith and be thankful," what he was saying to his disciples was, "Don't you know the God you serve is the God that is with you, and the God that is yours. Take this in remembrance of me." And then he took the cup, and after he had blessed it, he gave it to them. He said, "This cup is the New Covenant in my blood, it is shed for the forgiveness of your sins, and never forget that it is the will of God that there be good for you. Take this, take this, and be thankful. Let us pray.

O God, we remember the sacrifice of those who have given their lives for our freedom. As we recall the sacrifice of Jesus, who died for our sins, and as we offer up ourselves as a living sacrifice to do your work in our world, and to be faithful people who live to build the kingdom that is yours on this earth, may this sacrament help us make this world a sacred place again. All this we pray in the name of Christ Jesus, who continues to meet with us at the table. Amen.

You'll be directed, but you're invited to come down as soon as we get set up here. Come down the side aisles and return by the center aisle, and God be with you.