

Therefore, We Will Serve the Lord – Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

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On Thursday nights during my senior year of college, a group of 20 or so of us students would gather for very long evenings inside the communications building on our campus. For being on a small campus in the middle of rural northwest Iowa, it was a pretty diverse group.

There were athletes, art students, and musicians. There were brilliant thinkers whose futures would take them into leadership at large corporations or their own businesses. There were other students whose ambitions didn't include anything else but going back to their hometowns and getting a job there after college. There would be future teachers, writers, and scientists. There were black students, white students, and other minorities. There were students who were very creative and concerned only with the big picture, while others were more concerned with details—making sure all the I's were dotted and the t's were crossed.

Our night would begin around five with a group meeting that included dinner. And it would end after midnight—sometimes around 1 a.m.—when our work was finished.

We were the student newspaper staff. And our job was to design that week's edition that would be published on Friday morning. Our paper was called *The Tack*. And our motto was "the newspaper with a point."

Back in those days, the early 90s, newspaper layouts were still assembled by hand. We'd use word processors and publishing software for the text and the artwork, but it would still have to be printed out and assembled on massive boards. We would literally be cutting and pasting the finished articles with Exacto knives. Once they were all finished, one of the editors would drive them downtown to the local newspaper office, which printed them for us.

My job was to edit copy. So, writers would give their articles to me after they had been approved for their content. I'd edit them for grammar and have the writers rework them before they were considered a finished product.

It was such an eclectic group of students. We really were diverse. I became friends with a girl named Rose, who was one of the writers. We were such opposites. Rose was of Philippine descent. She was from the city—Des Moines. She was big on ideas, but not so much on organization and details. She wore her emotions on her sleeve. I was so not like any of that. And yet, we hit it off and were good friends through graduation.

This was true of other relationships among the staff. Some of those students became good friends through their work. Others didn't become friends but were simply united colleagues throughout the week and especially on Thursday nights. And what united us was our common purpose: to produce a newspaper we believed in and valued as a trusted voice on campus. We had a deadline to meet each Thursday, and we laughed, cursed, collaborated, cried, and disagreed at times all for the goal of producing a product we all could be proud of.

That was one of my strongest senses of belonging that I have felt. Bonded by a common belief in what we were doing and by a willingness to rely on each other for help when we each needed it, I felt like I had my place among that diverse group. I didn't always agree with everybody, but I always felt valued. And that feeling has stayed with me for more than thirty years.

I hope you all have had a similar bonding with a group of people at different points in your life.

When we do these infamous Chats with Matt periodically (conversations with new friends considering FPC as their church home), we always first spend some time talking about belonging and how it's different than simply being associated with a group. When you belong to something or someone, you feel deeply valued and that your values align with everybody's in the group.

In Joshua 24, God addresses the tribes of Israel. Consider their bond, the sense of community that had to exist among them. They were an oppressed people, due to their enslavement by the Egyptians. Simply because of their identity as an oppressed people, they had to have had an uncommon bond that ran deep. Within each tribe, there no doubt was

some disagreement. They didn't always get along perhaps. But they were united in their common identity.

The Israelites found their belonging in being a people saved by God. God made a covenant with them and promised to protect them. God reminds them of all this in Joshua 24, how God led Abraham from beyond the river and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. This was a beloved and cherished community.

Joshua tells them to, in response, revere the Lord and serve the Lord with sincerity and faithfulness, to put away those other gods that they had previously served.

So, they have a choice: put their faith in the God who took care of them or in the other gods they flirted with following.

In this community that we're part of, many of us (if not all of us) would say we have a deep sense of belonging. Within our community, there is diversity—mostly diversity of thought on a whole host of matters. But there's also an overriding unity among us. We're united in our belief that we, like the Israelites in many ways, have been taken care of by God—have been shown amazing grace and love from a God in Jesus Christ.

In Joshua, as throughout scripture, the covenant always rests on grace, on what God has already done. For the Israelites and for us, the good news of God's delivering and sustaining love comes first, calling forth, then, a response.

Joshua affirms his commitment: "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." As a community, a community with a strong bond within its members, Joshua makes their commitment: They would serve the Lord. Not the idols around them. The Lord.

We're called to make commitments, too. What are we going to do in response to what God has done for us? Will those idols we make for ourselves get our loyalty? Or will it be God?

If we're honest, we'd say that, well, it depends on the day. There are moments when we get off track, chasing something that is not of God. And yet, there are also those moments when we want to commit ourselves to serving according to what God has given us—both individually and as a community.

Today's a unique opportunity to do that. And whether you bring forward an estimate of giving card or choose not to but still with the intention of supporting our ministry in 2024, the act of committing our financial resources to the church is our way of making a choice. It's our way of saying, "For me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

I like how Bryan Whitfield, chair of the religion department at Mercer University, sums up this text and its relevance to us:

"The experiences of the Israelites at Shechem may appear remote from ours. We do not gather by tribes for formal ceremonies. We do not shape our contracts on the patterns of ancient compacts between Hittite kings and their subjects. Yet we too are a people of choices, commitments, and covenants. We too must choose a focus that grounds our living. Too often we make that choice by default, without clear intention or reflection, but we make it nonetheless. Joshua's words make that choice explicit, raising it to a level of conscious deliberation. What choices and commitments will shape our identities, our communities, and our destinies?

"We may choose to center our lives on the power of the past, on family tradition or ancestral piety, longing for what once was. We may choose to shape our lives around the values of the prevailing consumer culture, trimming our horizons to the demands of market forces. Both choices ensnare us in the power of sin and death.

"Or we may choose an identity not based on nostalgia or cultural accommodation but on the grace of a God of liberating love who leads us into a new era of freedom for life in community in a land of promise. The choice, as Joshua reminds us, is ours." (Working Preacher, November 12, 2023)

On a typical Sunday, I'm one of two or three to first enter the building at around 7 a.m. And I'm sometimes the last one to leave the building around 12:30. When I arrive early, it's full of anticipation for what God might do through the Spirit in the course of our worship and study and fellowship together. And when I leave after it's all over, I do so with a sense of satisfaction but also a bit of melancholy that that day's community gathering has come to a close.

And in the aftermath of Sunday morning, my conviction for serving God is strong. I've been blessed; God has been present; I'm part of a family that unites in a common calling. There's no substitute for that. And while it's sometimes fleeting, my commitment is never stronger in those moments.

Today is a moment for all of us to assess and act on our degree of commitment. How is it today that we will say, "As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord"?