

We Will Serve the Lord

I started thinking about what I would say this morning before Election Day. I'm glad that I did. Whichever way it went, I knew some people would be thrilled and some would be upset. Since I have to be the pastor to all of you, it's better if my own feelings about the outcome remain unsaid. That was easier to do by writing before I knew what happened. As it turns out the outcome was not so quick in appearing, and may not be known for sure until the Electoral College meets. However, that doesn't really change what I want to say. Whether you are excited or upset, elated or angry, Joshua's challenge we heard a few minutes ago is the same for every Christian: choose this day whom you will serve.

Joshua succeeded Moses as the leader of the people of Israel. God had Joshua do what Moses could not: lead the people into the Promised Land. By the end of the Book of Joshua the twelve tribes had each received their allotment of land. Now it was time to renew the covenant with God. Joshua reminded them how God first chose one person – Abraham – out of all the peoples of the earth. In verses we didn't hear, more of that history is presented, through Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and the Exodus in the wilderness. Finally Joshua issued his challenge: "choose this day whom you will serve." He knew how likely they were to turn away from the Lord. He saw it happen when he served under Moses. Yet the people protested that they *would* serve the Lord. Joshua disagreed but they insisted. Finally, almost reluctantly, Joshua renewed their covenant with God. Bible readers know how that turned out. The people weren't all that faithful.

In the center of this dialogue between Joshua and the people is his own clear and forthright answer: "but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Joshua is absolutely certain whom he serves. It really hit me to read that within the context of one of the most polarizing election seasons we have ever had. If each of us does not choose the Lord above any political party, above any President or President-Elect, then we are in grave danger of following other gods: the gods of partisanship, bitterness, hatred, and worst of all, despair. We saw that in many of the TV attack ads which mercifully have ended. Election outcomes *do* matter; that's why I vote. But even as I vote I keep in mind whom I ultimately serve.

Identifying God with a particular political viewpoint is as old as the Bible. Jesus consistently tried to get people to serve God alone. In doing so he ran afoul of both religious and political authorities. Think of who laid the trap for him in the question of paying taxes to Caesar: it was both the Pharisees and the Herodians, the religious leaders and the friends of the Romans. The Jewish authorities didn't have the power to crucify Jesus; they had to get the cooperation of the Roman rulers. Politics and religion have been mixed up for a long time. It wasn't pretty in ancient Rome and it's not pretty today.

That's why I'm always troubled by those who claim that God takes sides in political disputes. God does not "take sides." The prophets of Israel challenged both those in power as well as those who sought power. They consistently called for justice and a return to the Lord. In a few weeks we'll hear Jesus once again tell us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and those in prison. That's not taking a side; that's serving God in love and mercy.

I'm also struck by how Joshua said choose *this day* whom you will serve. Not tomorrow. Not when your life is together. Now. That's one of the main points of that familiar parable of the ten bridesmaids we heard today. There will be a time when God will call and we have to answer. We don't know when that will be. Those who are ready, who have chosen God, will be able to follow him into the heavenly banquet. Those who are foolish and not ready will be left out.

Whom will you serve? The gods that divide us? Or will you serve the Lord who unites us? If you are going to serve the Lord who unites us, now is the time to do that. Not when all of the votes are counted or the Electoral College meets or when things are going better than today. God calls now. I pray that your answer will be that of Joshua: as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. Amen.

[Pentecost 23: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Matthew 25:1-13.]