Barbara Ewy

November 12, 2023

Choose This Day

A small quilted wall hanging hangs above the desk in our living room. A gift from Alan to me, it proclaims “Choose this day whom you will serve…As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” The text is especially important to us: it was the text we chose for our wedding ceremony. We wanted to place God at the center of the home we would make together. We believed God had given us to each other, and it was a great gift!

When we married in 1991, we did not know what the future would hold. I was leaving two halftime jobs, both church related. Alan was working part-time for Vern Warkentin making jump ropes and “cooking” plastic discus and shot put. If our financial future was uncertain, our commitment to each other and to God was not. We had chosen, and we were certain that whatever the future held, service to God would be part of it. That fall we agreed to teach the third and fourth grade Sunday school class, together, here at First Mennonite. In one form or another, serving God has continued to define our way of life.

Joshua chapter 24 comes near the end of Joshua’s life. He is an old man now, nearing the end of his life. His words are not empty words. He has served God faithfully for many years, first as an assistant to Moses, later as one of only two spies who believed Yahweh could lead them into Canaan despite the power and prosperity of the people already there. Still Later, at the end of Moses’ life, Joshua had become the leader of the Israelite people. Now, near the end of his life, Joshua is making one last speech to encourage and challenge the people.

This is a momentous time, for the children of Israel have already entered the promised land. Although they had conquered some cities and driven the people out of others, they are still living among other people who do not know Yahweh and who serve other gods. Joshua knows the temptation to blend in, to conform to the ways of their neighbors, including acceptance of their polytheistic beliefs. The temptation is all too real. What will the people do once Joshua is no longer around to lead them? So he recounts the history of the Israelite people, beginning even before Abraham and Isaac, to show that even then, as far back as the family Abraham came from, beyond the Euphrates River, people in Abraham’s own family served other gods.

But Joshua does not stop with that. He also recounts how Yahweh has cared for the people, calling Abraham, and giving him many descendants, how the Lord led the people out of slavery in Egypt, across the Red Sea and through the wilderness, providing for their needs. God has led them into the land, protecting them from their enemies and giving them land and towns they had not built, and vineyards they had not planted.

“Now therefore,” Joshua continues, “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. But 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 choice Joshua has placed before the people is not unlike the choices we must make each day. We face competing demands for our loyalty, our time, our money, the things we pour our lives into. Our country makes demands on us: pay taxes (where do we draw the line between taxes that pay for roads, schools, the welfare of the people, and taxes that pay for war?) What about the advantages of enlisting in the military, getting help with the cost of education? How far do we as a church go in helping financially so young adults can afford a college education? What about our relationships with our neighbors, when they support war efforts and we do not?

Family makes demands on us. Yes, we want to care for our children and our elders. Yes, we love our families. But we also must recognize that our children belong to the Lord. We want to bring them up in ways that honor God. And when God’s call leads a family member far from home, we want to honor that call, as hard as it might be. The early Anabaptists understood this very well, some giving up their lives in response to Christ’s call, even leaving their young children behind for others to raise.

But there are other competing choices as well. Our culture says “buy, buy, buy”. We see it in advertising in the media. Even news talk shows on television have commercial segments, with featured products available at special prices through the app. Just hold your phone to the QR code and access the “must have” featured products. We live in a land of plenty by the world’s standards. Even with inflation, we are still able to spend. At what point do we draw the line between prosperity and simple living, between enough and too much?

The choices we make also affect our environment. Where do we draw the line between necessary resources and preserving a mountain (instead of mining that destroys it)? Where do we draw the line when commercial interests conflict with land that is sacred to our indigenous neighbors? How do we grapple with clean energy versus the demands for electricity, transportation, and healthy living? The answers are not always easy or simple.

In this country we have the right to vote. The line that we draw on these choices and others is also reflected in the candidates we support or vote against, the measures that we vote for or against, the issues that we support or work against. The myth is that we are a “Christian” nation. The reality is that no nation is “Christian”. It is the church that is called to follow Christ, and following Christ is a choice that we dare not take lightly.

Joshua warned the people against choosing to follow Yahweh without careful thought. Joshua told 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. If you forsake the Lord, and serve other gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.”

Jesus also told his followers to count the cost of following him. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?....None of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions.” (Luke 14:25-33)

Both Joshua and Jesus told the people that their choices matter. I do not believe that God is vindictive. But I do believe that God allows us to experience the consequences of the choices that we make. Some choices are life-giving; some choices lead to death. Choosing to live God’s way is life-giving. God’s way calls us to treat each other justly, and to show mercy. God’s way calls us to love our neighbor and seek our neighbor’s well-being, not just our own. God’s way calls us to care for the land, and celebrate its goodness rather than exploiting it…all that God created, God called “good”. God’s way is good; when we live God’s way we are blessed. I’m not talking about a prosperity gospel. But we are blessed with what we need, with what our community needs, with a sense of God’s presence and shalom, the peace that God gives.

God’s way calls us to serve each other, to care for each other. That means whatever our profession or role in life, each of us is called to love God and care for our neighbors. That includes not just our families or people who are like us, but people who are different from us, whose culture is different, whose beliefs are different, whose loyalties are different. We care for them, we treat them fairly, we live among them, but we do not adopt their ways when those ways do not please God.

Our choices matter. Depending on weapons for our security leads only to death., if not our own the death of those who die in war, in gang violence, in mass shootings, in racial incidents, in accidents. Depending on money for our well-being leaves life empty and unfulfilled. Sometimes relationships are sacrificed in pursuit of more and more. Putting like-minded people above those who think differently closes us off from learning and growing; it leads to prejudice, division, and even violence.

Our choices matter, not just to us as individuals, but to us as communities, to us as a church. Western thought has become very individualistic. Even our faith is often spoken of in individualistic terms. And yes, we do make choices as individuals, and those choices matter. But God’s call is a call to community. Joshua spoke to a community of people. Jesus often called people back into community. God’s Spirit creates new community, the church. We do not follow Christ alone but as part of a larger community. We discern together. We grapple with issues together. We make mistakes and we forgive…in community.

At Shechem, following Joshua’s speech, the people renewed their covenant with God. They told Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” These were not empty words. Brent Strawn, professor of Old Testament at Duke Divinity School puts it this way: “Joshua 24 is neither deluded nor self-incriminating, but rather *in love.* Not a syrupy—sweet sort of puppy love, but rather the firm, sober-eyed, committed, considered covenantal kind of love. This is the kind of love that is ready to sign on, for life, for better and for worse, with Holy God and with Jealous God (verse 19a), with punishing God (verses 19b-20) and altogether benevolent God (verses 3-13, 17-18a).” End quote. Indeed, Joshua 24:31 declares, “Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the Lord did for Israel.”

Our choices also matter. Next Sunday we celebrate Thanksgiving Sunday. We used to call it loyalty day. What kind of God do we as a church serve? Who is the God that we are ready to sign on with, knowing that the answers are not always easy, knowing that our choices matter, knowing that sometimes God’s way conflicts with the way of our nation, the ways of our neighbors, knowing that sometimes even in the church we struggle with each other to know the “right” theology, the right path, knowing that sometimes we even get it wrong……and yet not giving up, not calling it quits, not walking out, choosing instead to love each other despite differences, choosing to listen to each other, to learn from each other, to respect each other, to be the community that God has called us to be, choosing to live as God has commanded, doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. As for me and my house, we will choose the Lord. Choose this day, whom you will serve.