

This chapter includes Joshua's farewell speech. It was the last sermon he preached before his death. When someone is about to die, our interest in what they have to say goes way up. Perhaps they will say something very important, what matters to him or her more than anything else. The Hebrew children paid special attention when Moses gave his farewell speech. Now his successor, Joshua, was making his. What was he going to say? What would he deem most important to share with his people?

Joshua admonished his folks to revere and serve the Lord. We wouldn't expect anything less from a religious leader. Revere and serve the Lord. Maybe his words are so expected that we're almost disappointed. Couldn't Joshua lay down something more mind blowing for us on this auspicious occasion? But no, plain and simple, the basics, revere and serve the Lord, which we all know we should be doing anyway.

So, what gets in the way? Joshua seems to think it's a memory problem. We forget where we came from and who got us here. The Hebrews had God to thank. The Lord, or Yahweh, had created them as a people, and kept them going in spite of all the obstacles. The saga started with the call of Abraham, then went through slavery in Egypt, and a near death experience at the Red Sea. God always made a way, even when the land promised to them was filled with a bunch of city-states that looked a lot like

their old oppressors in Egypt. Somehow this mongrel group of slaves came to possess the land of Canaan. God did it, according to Joshua, down to the grapes and olives that they did not plant, but now enjoyed. Without God, the Hebrew people would not be. And for this reason, Joshua re-told the people their story and enjoined them to revere and serve their God. Joshua's last admonition was, "Dance with who brung ya'."

I don't know if we have a memory problem or not. After all, you're here this morning. And a big part of what Joshua means by serving God is doing exactly what we're doing: worshipping. But it never hurts to remember whose we are, and how we got here. It wasn't what we did that made us a people. God did it, an utter act of grace. Through many dangers, toils and snares, as they say. Somehow through a man on the cross, God found us, forgave us, and brought us home. Jesus himself descended not only from God, but also from the Hebrews, and by his suffering, opened up the covenant to any who wish to respond to him. We may live in Greeneville, Tennessee, far from the altar at Shechem. But Christ connected us to God's saving love story. How can we not be grateful, since we are eating the produce of God's gracious kingdom that we in no way planted, nor earned the right to harvest? We hear the call to serve and revere the Lord, to dance with the one who brung us.

But old Joshua he's a funny preacher. About the time we're ready to come to the altar and re-commit ourselves, he throws up a road block. "You cannot do this 'revere and serve' thing. You're not up to it." What? That sure sounds like a double message to me. One minute, Joshua tells us to choose whom we will serve, the next minute he's telling us if we choose the Lord, we're asking too much of ourselves. What gives?

Well, I can tell you what's not happening. Joshua isn't playing games with us, building up our determination by making the pathway harder. It's true that people often strive for what is difficult to attain. But any 3rd grader worth her salt can sniff out an adult who's telling her she can't just so she'll try even harder to do what the adult wants her to do. No psychological manipulation going on here as far as I can tell.

Joshua may have been victim to preacher's syndrome. Let me explain. Preachers have at least two fears. First, they fear that no one will listen to them. Second, they fear someone will. When a group of people takes your preaching seriously and is willing to stake their lives on it, that's a heavy load. More than once, I've become aware that someone has taken my words to heart and is about to commit to a strange and taxing path, and you would be surprised how much I want to protect them. Are you sure? Count the costs now. Let's get out the calculator. Are you sure? Of

course, I'm also protecting *me* in case something goes wrong. I've never set up a rock as a witness as did Joshua, but I understand the impulse to spell out the negative consequences so the people will know what they're getting into.

Mostly, I think Joshua is just being honest. Of course, we ought to serve the Lord. But the gate is tight, and the road is narrow that leads to true loyalty. Mere mortals struggle to put God above all else, and to line up all else they do with God. Now, serving other gods, that's a much easier road to take, at least in the short run, and there are plenty of options. Joshua even pointed them out to the people. You have the gods your ancient ancestors worshipped before God called Abraham and Sarah. And you have the gods of the Canaanite culture around you. Take your pick! Much to the people's credit, they took Joshua's history lesson to heart, and knew to whom they were indebted. So, they insisted on serving the God who had loved them better than they deserved.

If we're going to do the same, we'll need to figure out what idols might draw our attention. The Hebrews had an advantage over us in that the idols available to them were obvious. They were actual figures made of wood or stone. Baal was a carved bull that you could put on your mantle. Our idols, or false gods, are tougher to pick out for a couple of reasons. First, our idols are not necessarily engraved images. Second, they tend to be good things

that we mistake for God, gifts that God has given to which we attach too many of our hopes and dreams.

Anything coming to mind that might be an idol? Anyone? I don't aim to make you anxious, but one form of anxiousness isn't so bad. When you are unsettled over things you can't do anything about, that kind of anxiety isn't very helpful. The other anxiety is the one that leads to growth, an unsettling that will allow a re-settling of yourself that is more closely aligned with the truth. So, I ask again, if Joshua were here to name your unhealthy, growth-stunting attachments, what would he point out to you?

Well, there are the obvious ones that we absorb from the culture: money, power, fame. If we're going to dance with who brung us, we'll have to wrestle free from the Big Three. None of them bad in and of themselves by the way. But as our highest goals and saviors, money, power and fame promise much, but under deliver. Has anybody ever been truly set free by them?

I think I've told you that for me "success" has been hard to get off of my altar. The desire for success - measured in ever growing numbers - has been so intertwined with me that I'm just beginning to get untangled from its threads. I've got a long way to go. But at least I can name what success has become for me: a false god.

Anything come to mind? Anyone? Family might be on the list. All of us have to learn that our parents aren't God, whether they were good parents or bad parents. They need for us to let them be what they are: human. And life gets easier for us as well when we no longer keep them on the throne. It's so easy to wrap up our future in our kids, too. I hope all parents marvel in their children and take delight in them. But sometimes we push them to achieve what we didn't, to make up for our perceived deficiencies, and that's too heavy on their shoulders. Family is such a great gift. Hence, it's tempting to exalt family to high heaven and put too much pressure on our relatives to deliver what they can't.

What are your false divinities? What are the congregation's false gods? We have to ask and keep asking if we're going to put them away in order to revere and serve the truest God there is.

But even more importantly, we might have to fall in love again. Do you think that Joshua's farewell speech might have been so effective that the Hebrew children were swept off their feet? Maybe they insisted on choosing God, not because they wanted to show off how righteous they were, but simply because God won them over. When they thought how faithful God had been, they couldn't say no to the proposal.

When a couple comes in for pre-marriage counseling, I'm always thinking in the back of my head, "You have no idea what you're getting into." But lately I've been thinking that's exactly the point. They have only a vague sense of difficulties on the horizon, problems that will come, that once they take this step there is no going back. Yet, they are willing to take the vows anyway! Because life without the other would be intolerable. Love drives us forward together.

Well, if God looks anything like Jesus, which we believe to be true, then falling in love is not so hard. Look at Jesus, making time for children like he didn't have a busy schedule, eating with folks that were lonely and excluded, forgiving those who had ruined their lives, speaking words of mercy over the very ones who killed him. Joshua told his people that God was jealous, demanding and unforgiving. If they broke covenant, God would tear them limb from limb. Later, when the people failed, sure enough, they suffered, and God was mad. But God couldn't go through with the divorce. Instead, he refreshed the covenant through his truest representative, Jesus Christ, who cared enough to die for us. Such faithful love for us who don't deserve it. How can we turn away from that?

Like any marriage, our relationship with God is made up of a thousand little duties and daily obligations. Of course, we're not

equal partners with God. But we have to work out things together in prayer, remain true and faithful through worship, and resist those distractions that would muck up the relationship. Maybe day to day, it's easy to forget what drew us to God in the first place. So it's important to remember. Do you remember what got hold of you? A heart so open to us, someone who looked at us so favorably that we came to know our true worth, a partner willing to travel with us through hell and high water. Okay, God. We're yours. You gave yourself to us. We give ourselves to you. We're yours.

On occasion, we get invited to 50th wedding anniversaries. What better event to celebrate. You know what I like best at those anniversaries? If they have a band, that first dance between the couple. They smile, and hold on to each other, and by the way they move, you know they have been travelling together for a long time, and whatever they have suffered together, it's been worth the trouble. The dance says it all.

That's what we're aiming for as we covenant with God, to have been so true, we move in step with God, and at the end, it is pure delight. Revere and serve the Lord. It's more than a command. It's a love story. Are we in? Choose this day and every day who your partner will be. What will it be for you and your house. I say, let the dance begin.

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Joshua 24:1-28, "Dance With Who Brung Ya"