

"Choose This Day Whom You Will Serve" based on Palm 34, Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18 and John 6:56-69
Delivered on August 22, 2021 by Ruling Elder David R. Watts, Pulpit Supply

Everything we have is a gift from God – Our land, our homes, our wealth, our planet, our very lives. In his book (*"We Aren't Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry"*), Mark Elsdon highlights an important distinction between ownership and possession. "God owns" he tells us, "We humans just possess things for the time being". The truth is everything we have is on loan from God. What God has given to us; God can also take away. Our Reformed faith places an emphasis on the sin of idolatry. As people of faith, we are wise to remember that we are only stewards of the gifts God has entrusted to us.

Remember this, Joshua says, and "choose this day whom you will serve." He asks the Israelites to retire the gods of their ancestors, put the past behind them and return to serving the Lord with sincerity and faithfulness. The Israelites choose wisely and faithfully stating, "We also will serve the Lord, for he is our God." This choice between God and gods, repeats itself time and time again. History is spotty about faith, at the best of times. We find that little gods are tempting and we are all prone to idolatry. We forget, and have little clarity about where we get our gifts. Choosing to follow God, easily gets muddled by capitalism, nationalism and our own individual wants and needs. Our perspective is often confused with the understanding of what is "mine". We glory in private ownership, protecting what we have, forgetting who gave it to us. We often bow before the god of individualism, also known as the god of "me and mine". Each day we are asked to choose "a God from whom all blessings flow". We are asked to follow a God who gives generously and expects us to give and live generously in return. As Joshua asks, the moment is always before us, every day, the choice is ours. Who will we choose to serve? We should let the choice be reflected in our daily lives. Joshua asks the Israelites and us to choose to serve the Lord God alone, putting aside all other gods. Yes, we are only stewards of what God has given us, but it is so easy to feel you deserve what you possess, even if it is only on loan from God. The god of "me and mine" is so easy to follow.

The last time I was here, I said that "we like to hold our God high, almighty and lifted up, mostly distant and exclusively in heaven. We believe that Religion needs to be spiritual, not uncomfortably reachable. When we are searching for a God, we do not want or expect to find that presence in the flesh". Today's Gospel begins, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." The Greek verb "meno" is translated as "abide", "dwell" or "remain". It is used 34 times in John's gospels. (and 31 more times in the other gospels.) In John 15:4, Jesus calls his disciples "to abide in me as I abide in you". Jesus is offering us the means to abide in God, so that God can abide in us. We can and are able to live at the intersection of the human and the divine.

We like to think that if we had lived in Jesus' time, to witness Jesus in the flesh, that we would be true and immediate believers. Today's gospel shows us how difficult that may have been. When Jesus spoke in the Synagogue, many of Jesus' disciples responded with, "This teaching is

difficult, who can accept it?" and many disciples and followers turned away. Turning away from a God who had just fed 5000, healed the sick, taught them and walked on water. Even in Jesus' life time it was difficult to accept, difficult to understand and sometimes difficult to follow. It is easier to just look for another god, another way, another easier path to follow.

As we said, our lectionary spends five weeks on this gospel of John speaking of Jesus as the "Bread of Life", naming it as the means of true life with us abiding in God. We are asked to establish a Christian belief and a sacramental practice. In John 6, the people are angry at Jesus, not for his miracles, but for claiming his divine identity and purpose. They ask, "How can he say "I have come down from heaven", when we know he is human?" Jesus states, "But among you there are some who do not believe." We are asked to look past earthliness and believe in where the signs are pointing, His Divinity. We are called to a deeper commitment. The gospel says, "I am the bread of life, all who follow Me will have eternal life" with Jesus as the very presence of God. Jesus then asked his twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Peter is able to answer for all of us, "To whom can we turn, but the way, the truth, and the light?" Joshua is calling us to choose, Jesus is calling us to choose, it may be a difficult and confusing kind of thinking. We need to get our minds around it. What started in John's gospel with grumbling, conflict, struggle, questioning of beliefs and a purpose in life, ends with a faith statement, "To whom can we turn?". What path or god will you follow? We have both the capacity and responsibility to choose. Joshua says it plainly, "Choose this day whom you will serve." Joshua and Peter come to parallel conclusions, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." It is not completely clear what the chosen found difficult to accept, that Jesus called people to eat his flesh, or that he came down from heaven? Either way we need to make our own decision today and every day, will we choose to follow Jesus, or be among those who turned away? If it was Jesus that asked you, "Does this offend you?" How will you answer?

May the Grace and Peace of the Lord and the Holy Spirit be with you always, today and every day. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

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words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in **bold italics**.

John 6:56-69 (NLT) Anyone who **eats** my **flesh** and **drinks** my **blood** remains in me, and I in him. I **live** because of the living **Father** who sent me; in the same way, anyone who **feeds** on me will live because of me. I am the **true** bread that came down from **heaven**. Anyone who eats this **bread** will not **die** as your **ancestors** did (even though they ate the **manna**) but will live **forever**." He said these things while he was **teaching** in the **synagogue** in Capernaum. Many of his **disciples** said, "This is very **hard** to understand. How can anyone **accept** it?" Jesus was **aware** that his disciples were **complaining**, so he said to them, "Does this **offend** you? Then what will you think if you see the Son of Man **ascend** to heaven again? The Spirit alone **gives** eternal life. **Human effort** accomplishes nothing. And the very words I have **spoken** to you are **spirit** and life. But some of you do not believe me." (For **Jesus** knew from the **beginning** which ones didn't believe, and he **knew** who would **betray** him.) Then he said, "That is why I said that **people** can't come to me unless the Father gives them to me." At this **point** many of his disciples turned away and **deserted** him. Then Jesus **turned** to the Twelve and asked, "Are you also going to **leave**?" Simon **Peter** replied, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the **words** that give **eternal** life. We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of **God**."