

Whom will you serve?
Joshua 24:1-24

Whom will you serve? That was the question that faced the residents of the 13 British colonies on the Atlantic coast of North America in 1776. In July of that year, after the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, the passage of the Intolerable Acts, and the Battles of Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill, the Continental Congress answered that question, saying that Americans would no longer be subjects of the King, that they would no longer acknowledge the authority of the Crown-in-Parliament. Instead, they would institute a “new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

Whom will you serve? That was the question Joshua placed before the people of his day. They could have chosen to serve some of the Mesopotamian gods that the ancestors of Abram had worshipped. They could have chosen to serve the gods of Egypt, the place where many of them had been born. They could even have chosen to serve the gods of the people dwelling at that time in the land of Canaan. But Joshua said that he and his family would serve the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Whom will you serve? The same question continues to face us today. And just like those Ancient Israelites, we Americans have all sorts of gods from which to choose. No, we don't make statues in order to bow down to them, but we still look to all sorts of things to give us the safety and happiness mentioned in our Declaration of Independence, don't we? We look to science and technology in order to master everything from the natural world to the intricate workings of our bodies and minds. Power and influence promise to give us control over the people around us, compelling them to do our bidding. Pleasure promises to make our lives full of fun, to satisfy all of our senses. Of course, wealth promises to place all these things and so many others at our fingertips whenever we desire.

And yes, some of us have even come to put our trust in the system of government that our Founding Fathers designed, the oldest national constitution still in use. And when you put them all together – innovation and influence, pleasure and profit, along with political stability – well, you have what's often called the American Dream.

So, how has that dream turned out for us lately? How have all these modern gods done where it comes to fulfilling their promises to us? Our scientists still haven't been able to get a handle on this coronavirus, with 914 new cases reported just in Mississippi on Friday. Our attempts to fight it by closing down our economy has turned off the money tap for millions of Americans – the unemployment rate is 11 percent and 2.8 million of us lost our jobs just in the month of June. Our political systems are fraying, with our Federal Congress hopelessly deadlocked, and with local governments seemingly helpless either to stop violent protests in the streets or to enforce the wearing of masks and social distancing. No, all our wealth, all our knowledge, and all our political institutions, in one way or another, have let us down.

But what about the pursuit of happiness? Many Americans past and present have of course chosen to devote themselves to the god of pleasure, of self-fulfillment. But all our attempts to gratify our own desires have fallen short, haven't they? For example, great American musicians from Stephen Foster to Hank Williams have crawled into the bottle, allowing their embrace of alcohol to rob them,

and us, of their genius. Today, with so much information and entertainment available on the internet, the temptation to seek the oblivion of distraction is as enticing as it is fleeting, and thus unsatisfying.

And our continued quest for happiness through sexual experience continues to wreak havoc on the most vulnerable members of our society. Fractured families condemn far too many single mothers and children to poverty, and even though Mississippi is the buckle of the Bible Belt, 54% of our children today are born out of wedlock. Of course, that also means we have more and more of the illiteracy, the juvenile delinquency, the drug use and the gang violence that tend to accompany that grim statistic. Oh, and let's not forget the 60 million Americans who were aborted before they ever had the chance to be born, offered up as they were as sacrifices on the altar of sexual freedom. It seems that the god of pleasure may be the cruelest of them all.

So, maybe on this Independence Day weekend, as it is increasingly obvious that all these false gods have failed us in so many ways, maybe we should take another look at Joshua's challenge. Maybe it would do us modern Americans some good to turn away from that Dream in which we have been placing our faith and take another look at all the blessings that come from serving the Lord instead.

For make no mistake – those blessings are indeed considerable. In fact, in the first 13 verses of Joshua's speech, he lists the many ways that God had blessed His people throughout their history. God first led Abram to leave Mesopotamia and travel into a land he had never seen before, a land God promised to give to his descendants. God then repeated that promise to Isaac and Jacob, and the people of Joshua's day got to see for themselves just how faithful God had been. He had brought their parents' generation out of Egypt, and He had given them victory over and over again, first on the east side of the Jordan and then on the west. In sum, as verse 13 says, God gave them the land He had promised, a land on which they had not yet labored. He gave them cities which they had not built. He gave them vineyards and olive groves which they had not planted.

And hasn't God blessed us Americans to just as great an extent, with spacious skies and amber waves of grain, not to mention our Mississippi forests full of deer and turkey and our fields of cotton and corn and soybeans? And however much it might be under attack these days, hasn't God given us a rich heritage as well – a legacy of great men and women who struggled and sometimes even died to advance the cause of freedom over the last 400 years, patriots who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life?

But from the very beginning, that legacy hasn't exactly turned out the way we expected. After all, the British colonies were obviously intended to be settled by British people. But what a blessing that the Native Americans were gracious enough to teach the first English settlers of Massachusetts how to cultivate maize, saving them from almost certain starvation. What a blessing that people from West Africa knew how to cultivate rice, providing a broad foundation of prosperity in the Carolinas. No, if the British had tried to settle the colonies all by themselves, they would have failed miserably.

And after we declared our independence from the nation with the largest, most powerful navy in the world, what a blessing that our allies helped us to win our freedom. What a blessing that the French fleet just happened to achieve tactical superiority in the Chesapeake Bay just as General Washington and the Comte de Rochambeau were tightening the noose around Cornwallis' army at Yorktown.

But General Washington knew that such a victory wasn't just the result of human alliances. That's why he ordered that "Divine Service be performed" two days after the British army surrendered to him, pointing out that "the troops not on duty should universally attend with that seriousness of Deportment and gratitude of Heart which the recognition of such reiterated and astonishing interpositions of Providence demand of us." Washington knew that it was God Himself Who had determined the outcome of the battle, and thus of the war.

But God hasn't just blessed us Americans with land and freedom and friends. No, God was also gracious to pour out His Spirit on our ancestors in two Great Awakenings – the first on the generation that fought for our liberty and designed our form of government. In fact, it was a Biblical understanding of man – as both made in the image of God and yet fallen into total depravity – it was that understanding that is responsible for so many features of that system. For just as we have lodged the ultimate sovereignty with the people, at the same time we have recognized the need for that power to be restrained by representative government which is divided into three branches at different levels of jurisdiction. No, our constitution is not holy writ, but it would not, it could not have been designed as it is without its framers having a God-centered perspective on human nature.

And one of the most important of the blessings enshrined in our government and culture has been our freedom of religion. Yes, our Presbyterian ancestors brought the words of the Westminster Confession with them to our shores, but many of its words remained merely aspirational in the England and Scotland they left behind: "God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any way contrary to or different from his word in matters of faith or worship" (WCF 20.2) In America, that's true. We don't have to pay taxes to support ministers and denominations with which we disagree. Moreover, we are free to order our lives according to the Scriptures. And we are free to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

And that good news is the best reason of all for us to reject all those false idols and worship the One True God, isn't it? For God hasn't just given us worldly wealth and freedom. No, as Paul points out in our responsive reading from Romans chapter 8, Jesus has removed from all who trust in Him all the condemnation due to our sin. By His death and His resurrection, He has set us free from sin and death. Moreover, He has filled us with His Spirit, making us sons and daughters of God, adopted into God's very own family. And as God's heirs, He has promised that we will inherit the whole creation, that we will live with Him forever. What more could we possibly desire? How can the fleeting, worldly benefits of what we call the American Dream possibly measure up to that?

Whom will you serve? When you look at all the available options, it really isn't much of a choice, is it? No, it's no wonder that the people of Joshua's time answered the way they did: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods. We will serve the Lord, for He is our God." It was the only logical choice to make, for them and for us.

So, why did Joshua try to put them off? Why did Joshua say, "You will not be able to serve the Lord?" Because our God isn't just merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast, faithful, covenant-keeping love. No, as Joshua points out in verse 19, our God is also holy – completely separate from sin, utterly opposed to anything that goes against His good and perfect will. And our God is jealous – He desires not just some of our love and loyalty, but all of it. Like any good husband, God doesn't want to share His bride's affections with anyone or anything else.

That's why Paul makes such a stark and absolute distinction in our responsive reading between the flesh and the spirit – there's just no way to nurture both of them at the same time. For if we are focused on the flesh, if we continue to live according to our sinful, selfish desires, we are by definition hostile toward God. That's because living according to the flesh means remaining concerned with what we want, with what we think is right, instead of surrendering to what God wants, to God's definition of righteousness.

On the other hand, if we are living according to the Spirit of God, if we are bringing our thoughts and actions into line with His desires, that necessarily means we must put to death all the deeds of the flesh, all those selfish things which we used to think were so important. In other words, we can't have it both ways. If we want to worship God, then every day, every hour, every minute we must turn away from the flesh and surrender ever more completely to His Spirit, not in order to earn our salvation, but in gratitude for the grace He has already shown to us and to our fathers and mothers in the faith.

If that sounds like a tall order, well, it is. In fact, living such a holy, faithful, God-centered life isn't possible for anyone unless we are filled with the very Spirit of Christ, the only One Who was ever able to live without sin. But Paul reassures us that we can live such a new life, such a resurrection life in the power of the Spirit: "He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you."

"Whom will you serve?" Every person in every generation is faced with the same question. The people of Joshua's day replied, "The Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey." American Christians, will our answer be the same? Trusting in Christ alone as our Savior will we also bow the knee to Him as the Lord of every part of our lives? Will we turn away from the flesh and embrace the gift of the Spirit? Will we stop chasing the American Dream and allow the Spirit of Christ to lead us in the way of self-sacrificial, unconditional love? American Christian, whom will you serve today?