

If you have watched any television or listened to any radio this past week, you are well aware that we are in the midst of campaign season for state and national offices. The number of advertisements, commercials and debates will steadily increase as we approach the general election in November. The election is an opportunity for us to make a choice, to cast a vote for the individuals we want to lead our community, state, and nation.

Our scripture readings this morning are also about making choices. Both the reading from Joshua and the Gospel reading from Matthew are about our need to make a choice, to cast a vote. These readings present us with two questions. The first question calls for reflection and the second calls for decision. First we are to ask ourselves, “Whom do you serve?” Secondly, we are called on to make a choice: “Whom will you serve?”

Very often we find ourselves at worship feeling fragmented and frenzied. During the week we may have been tied in knots over problems at work, difficulties with the children (or with the parents), frustrations with those who seem to put too many demands on us. Perhaps you have come here this morning seeking a break, even if it’s just a brief one, from all the expectations that others have of you, taking a time out from your frenetic life.

Gathered here together, very much the way the children of Israel might have been gathered together by Joshua in the Promised Land, we may find ourselves caught off-guard and unexpectedly confronted by the question, “Whom do you serve?” The answer should be obvious from the fact that we are here in church. Why else would we be here when there are so many other things we could be doing? We are here to worship the LORD God, whom we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But the answer to this question isn’t always so clear cut for us, any more that it was for the children of Israel gathered before Joshua. I realize that having the pastor ask you a reflective question like this requires that you expend mental energy, and energy of any kind is one thing many of us find in short supply on a Sunday morning. Nonetheless, “Whom do you serve?” is a question we ought to ask ourselves periodically; especially when we are feeling that we are running on a low tank.

“Am I serving God or am I serving myself?” is another way to phrase this question. When we serve ourselves, once our energy is gone, it’s gone. We work ourselves to the point of exhaustion on some self-ordained project, usually accompanied by totally unreasonable expectations. When we try to serve God, however, and allow God to set the agenda, God provides us with all the energy we need, often in the most surprising ways. We can do our daily tasks serving ourselves, or we can do those exact same tasks with the mindset of serving God, and that makes a huge difference. Similar to the appearance of manna in the desert, God provides not the warehouse of reserves we would perhaps prefer, but God provides the resources needed for the day.

Serving God does not require us to leave our jobs or present responsibilities and go off to work in the inner city or on a reservation or in another country – though God sometimes does call individuals to do those things. Ironically, for some individuals, such a radical shift might actually be serving self rather than serving God if it is done to run away from a situation. Serving God means having a right order in our lives, remembering that we are human beings created in the image and likeness of God, not machines designed to operate around the clock, day in and day out. Serving God means recognizing that God is at the center of our lives and that all our actions flow from that realization.

This brings us to the decision required by the second question, “Whom will you serve?” The choice is ours to make, not only today, but every day. Each time we gather to give thanks to God in

the Eucharist, our action of sharing the bread and wine, we rededicate ourselves to the terms of the covenant God and the Christian community made with us at baptism. Hearing God's word and sharing the sacrament is one way we show our answer to the question, "Whom will you serve?" But it is the actions of our everyday lives that reveal our true intentions and give our clearest answer.

Whom will you serve? Last week we read the account of the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Those commandments begin, "I am the LORD, your God. You shall have no other gods before me." Martin Luther, in commenting on the First Commandment, writes that our god is whatever we put our trust in. So we have many possibilities from which to choose. We can choose the LORD God, of course, but we can also choose Self, Money, Country, Culture, Beauty, Sports, our Children, our Hobbies... the list of potential gods goes on and on.

When Joshua told the people they needed to choose whom they would serve, they did so knowing that God had already chosen them, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the temptation story, when the devil tempts Jesus with political power in exchange for serving him, Jesus makes his choice and replies defiantly, "Away with you Satan. I know what the scripture says – 'worship the LORD God and serve only him.'"

In John's gospel there is an incident after Jesus feeds the 5000, proclaims "I am the bread of life" and says that to have eternal life one must "eat his flesh" and "drink his blood." Many who had been his disciples took this teaching literally and were scandalized by it, so they turned away and stopped following him. Jesus then turned to his inner group of twelve disciples and asked, "Do you also wish to go away?" In other words, are you going to serve and follow me, or are you going to look elsewhere? It is to that question that Peter responds with the words we often sing in the gospel acclamation, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:68-69)

We, too, have a daily decision to make – whom will we serve? Will it be Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God, or will it be a god of our own making? The context for our decision is the same as for the people of Israel and the disciples – we know that God has first chosen us. We have been claimed in baptism and given the name, "Child of God." Jesus asks the question of us, "Are you going to stick with me? Are you going to live in the covenant of your baptism? Will you have me be the Lord of your life?" He awaits to hear our answer each day.