

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

18th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A

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Text: Joshua 24:1-15

Title: “A Way Out of No Way: Serving”

Last week I emailed Kris Wise, the chairperson of Neighbors Against Drug Abuse. Sent him an article I read in the New York Times. It featured Dr. Thomas Andrew who was the chief medical examiner of the state of New Hampshire. He retired last month at the age of 60. In his work as a medical examiner, Dr. Andrew has seen the opioid epidemic overwhelm morgues. The number of deaths he has seen in his state has been shocking: “more deaths per capita from synthetic opioids like fentanyl than any other state. Last year the overdose death toll...reached nearly 500, almost 10 times the number in 2000.” On Friday several people from the Neighbors Against Drug Abuse group attended a seminar at the Doubletree Hotel in Bay City learning more about this epidemic and you should have a flier in your bulletin that describes the October 24 Heroin Symposium which is a first step in addressing the problem here because it is very much present. In fact, one person wrote that there were more people in the seminar on Friday than they’ve had at any previous conferences. It’s a growing problem here, too.

As a result of this growing epidemic in this country, Dr. Andrew made a choice to serve in another way. He retired and has enrolled in a seminary program with plans to become an ordained deacon in the United Methodist Church and serve as a chaplain for the Boy Scouts of America and also to serve as a chaplain on the Appalachian Trail in order to be present to the young people who are struggling with life issues.

“After seeing thousands of sudden, unexpected or violent deaths,” Dr. Andrew said, “I have found it impossible not to ponder the spiritual dimension of these events for both the deceased and especially those left behind.”

Life constantly presents us with choices as to how we will respond to what is before us. IN this man's case, he has decided to focus on the spiritual dimension of life and death. But the truth is we are all confronted with such choices because as Dr. Andrew put it

The people on his examining table could have lived a lot longer “but for a few millimeters of cholesterol in the wrong blood vessel, a second of inattention by the driver of a car or the lethal potency of a drug obtained on the street.”

Every day we are faced with choices about how we live our lives and who we will serve. As Bob Dylan famously sang:

Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody

Bob Dylan wasn't the first to proclaim this choice. In the book of Joshua, the successor to Moses says the same thing. Listen as Joshua challenges the people to choose whom they will serve:

24 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. ² And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. ³ Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; ⁴ and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. ⁵ Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. ⁶ When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. ⁷ When they cried out to the LORD, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time. ⁸ Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. ⁹ Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to

curse you, ¹⁰ but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand. ¹¹ When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. ¹² I sent the hornet^[b] ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. ¹³ I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.

¹⁴“Now therefore 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. ¹⁵ Now 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.”

So Joshua has been given the reigns from his predecessor, Moses, and has led the freed slaves to the point that they have now become a community of their own with growing power and privilege. He reminds them of all they have been through, all that God has done to provide for them, how God has led them to this place but apparently they have not entirely given themselves over to the One who brought them out of Egypt. Apparently, there is some wavering in their ranks. “Put away the gods that your ancestors served....”

For some reason I hear an echo of Joshua’s voice in Jesus when Jesus preaches in the Sermon on the Mount: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Matthew 6:24)

Hearing Joshua and Jesus I came across the story of Tom Chappell. Mr. Chappell is the CEO of the natural toothpaste company Tom’s of Maine. When Chappell was 43 eighteen years ago he found himself growing wealthy as a result of the success of his company. You’d think there would be exhilaration and energy in response to his success but instead he found himself feeling drained emotionally and spiritually. Often when this happens to business startups the owners will sell the enterprise for a nice profit and then retire to sail the world or buy an island somewhere to enjoy the rest of their lives in leisurely pursuits, but Chappell found himself

chewing on a question put to him by his pastor's wife: "What makes you think Tom's of Maine isn't your ministry?"

He decided to stay with his company and enroll in Harvard Divinity School. The agreement with his company was that he'd tend to his CEO duties in Kennebunk, Maine for half the week and the other half he'd be in Cambridge, Massachusetts studying theology. Things were running so well in his absence that the board of directors suggested he stay full time with his theological studies. So that's what he did. He stayed and prayed.

When he graduated four years later, Chappell asked one of his professors to lead the company's board through a process to help them develop a mission statement and a business plan that was based on moral and ethical principles. He wanted the company to be about more than money, more than the numbers. He wanted it to have soul. What developed out of that work was a commitment to honor its commitments to employees, owners, vendors, consumers, the community AND the environment. And secondly, the company adopted a plan based on a concept put forth by the theologian Martin Buber that committed the business to start a series of three partnerships each year that promote the common good, such as saving America's rivers, community gardening and support of a local dental clinic for the poor.

This second career theological school graduate challenged his company to be about something more than profit, more than the accumulation of wealth, more than about the bottom line.

Joshua asks the freed slaves what kind of people they will be, to whom would they give their allegiance:

“...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.”

Bob Dylan channeled Joshua when he sang:

You may be a construction worker working on a home

You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a dome

You might own guns and you might even own tanks

You might be somebody's landlord, you might even own banks

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes

You're gonna have to serve somebody

Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord

But you're gonna have to serve somebody

Joshua's challenge issued to the Israelites is our challenge too. Whether we are the leader of an industry or someone working on the line in a business owned by someone else we still choose who we will serve and what kind of people we will be. The choice we make affects how we live our lives. It affects the decisions we make and the quality of our relationships. Ultimately it affects how we deal with our own mortality and that of those we love.

“Choose this day whom you will serve.”

I read the story of a pastor named Timothy Brown who went to the hospital to visit a young man who shared his first name. Timothy, the patient, was dying of leukemia, his life being taken from him one blood cell at a time. At this point he was so weak that his pastor had to kneel to make it easier to have eye contact and conversation.

"Hi, Tim," he said, and the patient responded, "Hi, Pastor."

There followed an awkward pause because Brown didn't exactly know what to say. The long, dark shadow of death seemed to make chitchat meaningless.

Finally, the dying man broke the silence by saying, "I have learned something."

Brown said, "Tell me, what have you learned?"

Tim said, very faintly, "I have learned that life isn't like a DVD."

Perplexed, Brown said, "I don't get it. What do you mean?"

The patient responded, "Life isn't like a DVD -- you can't fast-forward past the bad parts."

As Brown knelt there, Tim the patient said, "You know what else I learned?"

"No, I really don't. Please tell me."

"I have learned," Tim whispered, "that Jesus Christ is in every frame, and right now it's just enough."

“Choose this day whom you will serve” not just to give you comfort in your own dying days, but because life as God gives it is richer, deeper than the shallower pursuits of wealth and accumulation. Choose this day whom you will serve because God offers us life and life abundantly when we are courageous enough to choose God. When there appears to be no way out God offers what we need in every frame. Still, the choices are ours to make. Whom will you choose?