

Sunday - November 22, 2009  
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner  
Sermon - **Going to Church and Being the Church**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace for you are our rock, our Lord and our redeemer. Amen.*

After the Israelites had wandered 40 years in the wilderness with Moses, Joshua led them into the promised land. Joshua was a strong, capable leader and a faithful follower of God. He led his men into battle many times and captured city after city, town after town. He obeyed God, Each time he had the choice; he chose God. The Israelites were as pig-headed under Joshua's leadership as they were under Moses'. There were local gods, which were only man-made idols in the country. The Israelites over and over needed to choose whom to serve. Joshua put it to them with these words: **Joshua 24: 14-15.** "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. 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."

This sentence, as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord, is one of the most well-known of the Old Testament, and you can go to Hallmark gift shops or online and pick up all sorts of plaques and bags stitched with these lines. Someone gave one to me --- I keep it in my living room, but like any words, it's better if they are written in our hearts and minds and lived out in our lives.

If you're wondering how those Israelites could have NOT been grateful for God's help and could NOT have served the Lord after all God had done for them and gotten them through....well, it really is just amazing isn't it. Once things were easing up a bit, and they were not in constant danger of losing their lives, they lost touch with the God who had been faithful to them. They began living lives of ease again, and looked around at the false gods that were being worshipped around them. These names of these foreign gods are unfamiliar to us today..... Adram'melech, Amon, Artemis, A-she' ra, Ash' toreth, Ba'al, Ba'al-pe'-or, Che' mosh Da'gon, Mero' dach, Rom' fa, Tam' muz, Zeus. These are just a few --- just the ones I named in scripture and that I could figure out the pronunciation of! These are the ones that the Israelites --- the Hebrews --- God's chosen would forsake him for and worship.

Well, good thing that doesn't happen now. Nope.... Not at least choosing false gods over the one Lord our God..... well, it doesn't happen with these particular false gods whose images we only see in history books and on the history channel. No these old gods who appealed to the Israelites don't entice us, but others do. We are much like the Israelites, and our false gods just go by different names: Success, pride, position, power, acquisitions, wealth, sports,

entertainment, leisure activities..... Anything which we give greater time, interest, money and thought to instead of God.

For those people who purchase on a plaque or a stitched pillow that little quote from Joshua, I wonder if they are buying it to remind themselves..... or if they just really have no idea that we, like the ancient Israelites, need a reminder about the choice we have in worshiping.

It's hard to choose God ---- these other things are so very appealing --- enjoyable --- and really there is absolutely NOTHING wrong with them, so long as we keep their place in our lives in perspective, so long as they don't control us, so long as we are not living for more wealth, more stature, more possessions, more fun instead of living for God.

So, that's one choice you and I are continually confronted with. On this Stewardship Sunday, we need to think a bit about how we prioritize God in our life....what is God's place, what is the importance of our association as God's people, living out the Christian beliefs we say we keep. It's hard --- figuring out how to balance so much of what God has given us, with keeping God first in our lives.

**Our second choice on this stewardship Sunday** is to rethink this whole activity of going to church and being the church. A great step, a strong commitment is to go to church. Going to church promotes the likelihood of worship of God and keeping a proper balance in our lives. But there needs to be more. If we just come to church and sit waiting to be entertained or made to feel better, we're not holding up our full end of the covenant, the promise with God. We come to church on Sundays to worship God, to learn, to find encouragement and hope, to experience God's presence. The next step is BEING the church --- both here in this sanctuary and every minute of our lives outside of this Sunday morning hour.

Being the church means living our lives as good stewards of our time, our talents, our money, our presence in whatever way or in whatever need presents itself. Being the church was actually the title for the beautiful presentation Doug Reading presented earlier with the choir's singing. Doug helped remind us of God's wondrously beautiful creation, or Jesus' mission and service here on earth, then through the pictures of members of St. Matthias serving in a variety of ways, we are reminded how you ARE being the church.

Let me remind everyone – long-time members and brand new members, you are invited – encouraged – welcomed to work on any project or ministry here at St. Matthias. You may attend any committee meeting --- or if you don't like meetings, you may just email folks or gather a couple of buddies and begin a new outreach or service. Or you may just say, "I'll help – here's my skill – call me on Fridays, or Sunday afternoons." This isn't the ONLY way to BE church, but can be a good introduction. If you're someone who needs to meet more people and feel connected, there's nothing like working side by side with someone and getting to know them better and beginning a friendship.

Joshua told his people to "choose this day whom you will serve.... As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Serving the Lord is done through prayer services and prayer chains, through visiting those shut-in, through raking

leaves and driving sick people to the doctor and hospital. Serving the Lord means doing something for the upkeep of these church facilities to keep them functioning for worship and activities. Serving the Lord means teaching a Sunday School class, taking care of little ones in nursery, singing in the choir, cooking for a meal here.

“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord....” And Jesus expanded our understanding of serving the Lord when he said, when you have fed, clothed, visited, loved the least of these my brethren, you have done it to me.”

That is EVERY church’s mission: to love God and serve God through others. St. Matthias tries to accomplish this mission in the ministries we offer.

Let’s be precise about our mission:

Do you believe that we should be feeding the hungry, clothing the needy,  
Do you believe that we should be building and re-building homes for those without adequate shelter?

Do you believe we should be teaching the stories of the Bible to children?

Do you believe we should be giving our youth hands-on opportunities to live out their faith?

Do you think we should visit the shut-ins, how about those in the hospital?

If you are answering NO to any of these questions, then you are right NOT to work on behalf of any of our activities in these areas or give money to support the ministries of this church. Because we are doing what Jesus called us to do. And that is just here, right here, in Fredericksburg....

Yet, Jesus never heard of Fredericksburg.... It just didn’t exist in his lifetime, so where is it that we draw the line on where we help and who we minister to?

Because we cannot be in Haiti, our Methodist connectional church works on our behalf..... and establishes hospitals for the indigent there. Jesus did not say to care for all except those in Haiti.

Because we cannot be in Mozambique building an orphanage, our Methodist connectional church works to build that orphanage.....Jesus did not say to take care of all children except those in Mozambique.

Because we cannot travel to the Soviet Union to preach and teach about Jesus, our Methodist connectional church is at work there teaching seminary students so that the gospel might be shared in their native language.....Jesus did not say to just preach the word to only English-speaking folks.

BEING the church is a huge undertaking..... it requires your commitment and mine, your enthusiasm, your prioritizing and mine --- it requires choices.

This is Stewardship – Pledge Sunday..... those of you who have long been a part of Methodism know that each year we ask you to make a promise about how you will financially support the life and work of the church. Those of you who are just visiting, or haven’t been a part of a Methodist church may find this all new. I know that some of you are military --- have attended chapels on bases where all expenses are covered so you’re not familiar with the costs of running a church. Let me just say that the costs are just like you running your household budget – we pay a mortgage, utility bills, supplies and maintenance, salaries, medical benefits.... Just like other institutions. But as I mentioned

earlier, we also have a portion – a big portion of our mission and our money that is dedicated to service of others.

All this does not happen magically. But it does happen consciously and lovingly and dedicatedly --- by YOU who have made the commitment in your hearts and are willing to make it with your checkbook, “as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

That’s what this Sunday – Stewardship and Pledge Sunday is all about..... it’s about you and me pausing to consider who we are and whose we are, and how we are living out that identity and what we will promise to give of our money that the work of Jesus Christ might be carried on.

Let’s pause a few moments --- pray, consider how you want to live out BEING the church in this coming year. If you do not have that bright yellow pledge card and need another, the ushers will distribute them with pencils. After a brief period, we will receive your pledges together with your offerings for this week during our regular offertory.