

Menifee United Church of Christ

Established in 1962 by God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit

SERMON FOR

August 23, 2015

“Whom Do You Serve

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Live Life Fully Alive!

Psalm 34:15-22

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry. The face of the LORD is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth. When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. The LORD is near to the broken-hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD rescues them from them all. He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken. Evil brings death to the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Joshua 24:14-18

“Then Joshua said to the people, “Now respect the LORD and serve Him fully and sincerely. Throw away the gods that your ancestors worshiped on the other side of the Euphrates River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD. But if you don't want to serve the LORD, you must choose for yourselves today whom you will serve. You may serve the gods that your ancestors worshiped when they lived on the other side of the Euphrates River, or you may serve the gods of the Amorites who live in this land. As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. Then the people answered, “We will never stop following the LORD to serve other gods. It was the LORD our God who brought our ancestors out of Egypt. We were slaves in the land, but the LORD did great things for us there. He brought us out and protected us while we traveled through other lands. Then he forced out all the people living in those lands, even the Amorites. So we will serve the LORD because he is our God.”

Whom Do You Serve?

Hello and good morning. Many of you know I am a teacher – semi-retired, but still substituting frequently. If I were here to teach you about the Magic E or the Bossy R, to sing songs to help you learn your multiplication tables, or show you how green, yellow, and red sentences help you write a good paragraph, I'd be right in my element. But here, in this church, in front of all of you, and in the absence of Rev. Bill, I am really much more of a student than a teacher. In keeping with our tradition, I'll start with short story, one with a teacher-slant.

After being interviewed by the school administration, the young aspiring teacher (this could have been me!) said, “Let me see if I got this straight. You want me to go into a room full of 30-40 kids, correct their disruptive behavior, observe them for signs of abuse or neglect, monitor their dress habits, and of course instill in them a love of learning. You want me to check their heads for lice, their backpacks for weapons, and their lunch boxes for quality, nutritious food. You want me to wage a war on drugs, prevent STDs, and raise their self-esteem and personal pride. You want me to teach them patriotism and good citizenship, sportsmanship and fair play, how to register to vote, balance a checkbook, and apply for a job. You want me to recognize and report signs of antisocial behavior and also ensure that they pass all state-mandated exams. You want me to communicate regularly with their parents through phone calls, e-mails, notes, report cards and progress reports. You want me to do all this with a white board and markers, some books, and naturally in this day and age, a few computers, and a big smile on my face --- and you want me to do all this and you tell me I CAN'T PRAY! (Actually, to me, that story is as much about the power of prayer as it is about the stresses of being a new teacher. I did and do pray each time I go into a classroom.)

Since I am in more of a student role this morning, I'll do what students do, and that is ask questions, and try to answer them myself. Good teachers rarely answer their students' questions directly, or at least not right away. You may agree with my answers, or you may have other, better ones. If so, I'd certainly like to hear them, and also in keeping with our tradition, I'll be glad to meet you for a sermon talk-back after the service. And to answer one question before you even ask – yes, there will be a quiz afterwards!

“As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” The question I want to ask you as well as myself is, “Whom do I or we serve?”. That proclamation by Joshua was quite familiar to me. I've seen it hanging on plaques by front doors, embroidered on wall-hangings in kitchens, and gracing the covers of greeting cards. It seems so straightforward and simple. Joshua reminded his people of how God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, helped them vanquish their foes, and gave them new lands in which to settle and grow prosperous. They recognized, at least at

that moment, how they had been blessed by God, and they vowed to serve Him. “We will serve the LORD because He is our God,” they all answered. We see later that their vow was not that easy to uphold, as the Old Testament shows us time and time again how the people of Israel struggled to follow God and not their individual desires.

But that's all history. So my first question to myself as I pondered this passage was, “How does this relate to me today?” I’m a Christian, we’re all here Christians, so of course, we serve the LORD. We no longer dance around Asherah poles or lay sacrifices on the altars of Baal. We DO serve the LORD ---- don't we? I think I do. But are there some issues that intrude, sometimes subtly, sometimes more strongly, that capture my attention, that become like gods that I worship and serve without even being conscious that I’m doing so? Whom do I (or we) serve?

To serve means, variously, to be a servant to; to put in, to spend; and, to be of assistance to, to benefit. Am I a servant to God? Do I spend my time, talent, and treasure with God in mind, and for God's benefit? When I ask myself those questions, I have to stop and think hard about my own life.

When I was working full time, we often said there were not enough days in the weekend. My work kept me busy all day, every day, and on the weekends, my to-do list seemed impossibly long. Funny thing is that now, even though I’m not working full time, I still feel there’s not enough time to accomplish all I think I should. Even in retirement, there’s not enough time to do all the nothing I want to do! It’s been said famously that time and the tides wait for no man. We can either think of the passage of time as a thief that wants to rob us of our looks and our strength, or as a gift that allows us the opportunities to grow, change, heal, and love. We can rush through each day, always planning the next one before we’re even done, or we can “...stop and smell the roses”. (And what beautiful, fragrant roses we have in our own Peace Garden!) We can take charge of our time and use it for the most important tasks that God has entrusted to us, or we can try to “do it all” and really accomplish very little.

Jesus said He Himself came to serve, not to be served. Feeding hungry people in our own community, offering the homeless a

safe place to sleep, providing shoes and backpacks for children who can't go to school without them, even giving empty grocery bags and egg cartons which, amazingly, are so needed by Survival Ministries, and being a part of this wonderful, open, and inclusive congregation that recognizes that we are all God's children ---when I spend my time doing these things, I believe I am serving the LORD because what I choose to spend my time on benefits others.

I know how easy it can be to devote so much time and energy to my job that it becomes almost my sole focus. But when I do, my life is out of balance, no longer in tune with God. For some people, hobbies or sports can consume so much of their time that there is little left for family, friends, and certainly not for serving the LORD. And for many of our younger generation, technology truly has become their god. There is such total, almost slavish reliance on computers and smart phones. The internet and You Tube command their attention and rule their time. They, and to be honest, many of us, are serving the very technology that should be serving them. I believe our greatest challenge is to take back our time, to step back from those activities, and instead look for ways to be of service to others. In Matthew 24:40, Jesus said, "Whatever you do for the least of these, you do it for Me." And shouldn't we also be reassured that "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under Heaven."? Let us use our time to serve the LORD.

We all have skills and abilities, interests and passions. We are all unique in what those skills and abilities are, but we need to remember that all our talents originate with God. We live in a world of competing voices, from radio, TV, the internet, music, books, magazines, and newspapers – all telling us how to live, what we need to make us happy, defining success, and telling us how to find fulfillment. If we listen too much to those voices, we may not hear God's still-speaking voice. That voice is guiding us to use our talents to do what He really intends us to do. Recognizing God's intentions for us and following His path is the path to true fulfillment.

When we sit down to a meal, we first give thanks to God for our food. But have we thought to give thanks to the farmer who grew it, the trucker who carried it to the store, or the clerk who

sold it to us? When we do the jobs God intended for us, we become a part of the way He provides for us all. Like Jesus, we, too can serve. The LORD created parents to love and care for their children, and teachers to teach them, and doctors and nurses to help and heal them, and musicians to make music, and artists to create art, and gardeners, secretaries, scientists, inventors, explorers, poets, philosophers and preachers, so that we all could be of assistance to others, we all could spend our energies in serving others, and we all could use our own unique gifts and channel our God-given passions to give meaning and purpose to our own lives.

I believe that in working to please God and trusting Him to meet our needs as we work to meet the needs of others, we serve Him best. We serve God through serving others. So when you find yourself in the position to help someone, be happy and feel blessed because God is answering someone's prayer through you! Isn't that miraculous?

Kathleen recently led the women's Bible study group in reading and discussing a fascinating and insightful book called "The Truth About Money Lies" by Russ Crosson. I gained much of my inspiration for this sermon from that book and our discussions, and I highly recommend it to all of you who were not a part of our Bible study! We explored some of the commonly held beliefs of our consumer-driven society, including "My talents and abilities have produced my wealth."; "The harder I work, the more money I'll make." and "The more we have, the happier we'll be." Underlying these and other false beliefs about money, is the sad fact that our culture has evolved, or maybe a better word would be devolved, to be money-oriented and money-driven. Good grief! Even our church has budgets, and trustees, and investment accounts. How many of us are sometimes overwhelmed by financial concerns? I know I am. I am often guilty of being preoccupied with paying the bills, worried about making ends meet, constantly balancing and re-balancing my budget. Rationally, I know I have enough – I have more than enough. But that nagging, irrational voice whispers to me, and I have to remind myself consciously that God has told us to ask and it shall be given (Matthew 7:7). Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly."

But He also said that we cannot serve both God and wealth, money. We think money can give us what we want – power, prestige, security, contentment, self-worth – but those really are the gifts that only God can give us, if we serve Him. Just as all our talents originate with God, so, too, all our wealth belongs to Him. Luke 6:38 tells us, “Give, and it shall be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” And as Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”

We have been taught that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Our goal then should be to be more giving. For by giving, we are serving God.

So, here comes the quiz! Are we mindful of how we use our time, talent, and treasure? Do we acknowledge that all we have and all we are comes from God and through God? And do we consciously use those gifts, talents, and abilities to do God’s work? When we do, then we are always serving the LORD. The people answered Joshua those thousands of years ago, “We will serve the LORD because He is our God.”

Whom do you, or we, serve? I know we can answer the same today: WE will serve the LORD because He is our God! We will serve the LORD because He is our God.

I want to especially thank Craig and Chuck, Ray and Velna, for their help and support as I worked on this sermon.

And we can be certain that God is still speaking because I am here giving this sermon – and I could not have done this on my own! Thank you and God bless us every one. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father. We thank you for the many gifts you have given us. Help us to always be aware and grateful, humble and worthy. Help us to use those gifts to help others as you have helped us. Help us to bless others as you have blessed us. And help us to serve others, and by doing so, to serve you. Now and forevermore – through the peace, the promise, and the power of the Holy Spirit, and by the grace, the glory, and the goodness of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen!

THE GOLDEN RULE

*What is hateful to you
do not do to others.*

Judaism

*Do to others what you would
have them do to you.*

Christianity

*None of you believes until he wishes for his
brother what he wishes for himself.*

Islam

*Do not do to others
what would cause pain if done to you.*

Hinduism

*Hurt not others in ways that you yourself
would find hurtful.*

Buddism

*Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain,
and your neighbor's loss as your loss.*

Taoism

*Do not do to others
what you do not want them to do to you.*

Confucianism

*Treat other people
as you'd want to be treated in their situation.*

Humanism