

“Statutes, Not Statues”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 1, 2018

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 34:1-8

Rev. John Wahl

Joshua 1-2a, 13-25

We come together for worship today at the conclusion of a high-energy Vacation Bible School where forty children – and almost that many volunteers – spent the week learning about God at work among us; historically through the stories of scripture, but also in the lives of God’s people who give and receive, teach and learn, care for and are cared for – all in God’s name. When we gather for worship, it is to remember and give thanks for what God has been doing, but also to renew our covenant with the God who is still at work in and around us.

Each day, on this communion table, we constructed images as reminders of Gods’ work among us. Each day, we also worked on constructing gifts that will be presented to Habitat for Humanity partner families when they move into their new homes – building blocks and birdhouses, bookends and coat racks – tangible items that show how much we care for them and about the necessity of fair and decent housing for all.

On the final day of VBS, in the midst of the music and crafts, science experiments and water games, we learned about the importance of worship – gathering to remember and give thanks to God, and to remember our sacred covenant. We focused on this story about Joshua and the stone of remembrance that represented God’s gracious work among the ancestors, and how God is still powerfully at work among us and through us: building us up so that we can support and care for others.

In this story, Joshua invites all the people of Israel to the town of Shechem and reminds them of the long history of all that God had done for Israel: the promises to the ancestors, the deliverance from slavery in

Egypt, and God's provision through the wilderness. He testifies to God's grace, mercy and unmerited love of Israel which forms the reason for Joshua's call to the people: "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness." (v. 14)

The implication of Joshua's words is plain: it was often easy for the Israelites to fall into false worship in those other places where they had previously lived. But now that the long-awaited promises of God had been fulfilled, there could be no excuse for serving any other God in the land of promise.

The Israelites' words of assurance to Joshua at Shechem echo the words of an earlier generation spoken to Moses at Mt. Sinai. There too the people had promised with enthusiasm; however, they quickly forgot their commitment and broke their covenant with God. They constructed and worshipped an idol – a golden calf. Joshua had been present that day; he had heard insincere assurances from the people before.

The decision is therefore presented as an option to serve the God of their own ancestors, or to instead serve the gods of Egypt – their former captors – or the gods of the Amorites – the people who resided in the lands they had now entered. Joshua does not denigrate these other gods; they and the Lord are simply given as alternative choices for allegiance.

The question for the people, then, is how they will remember their history and whether God's activity in their lives will be the basis for their identity going forward. Now, Joshua is telling them, is the moment to remember and to choose whom they will serve. They have options; which will they select?

Joshua attests to his community that he and his household have chosen to be in covenant with God who gave both the land where they reside and the laws that they follow. His is not an individual decision; it is for the people he lives with and loves. Together, they commit to live their lives with justice; giving as they have received, loving as they have

been loved. For us and our households, this is also our choice: we must decide our identity, our defining passions and loyalties. Even beyond religious identity, we continually must choose what kind of people and members of society we intend to be.

But as soon as the people make their choice, Joshua is immediately suspicious of their promises. He knows them all too well. Just like their ancestors before them, he believes that they will be tempted to abandon the Lord for foreign gods. For often, talk is cheap and obedience costly. Their God is a demanding God, expecting loyalty from those who claim to serve.¹

Sometimes, we hear the message that it is all up to us to create an identity, choose where to live, what to do, and who to be with; that it seems there is no place for God in our lives. And sometimes, it seems like we don't have choices, but we do. As families, as households, and as faith communities, we choose our loyalties and commitments. What is important to God that is also important to us? Is it fair and decent housing, food for the hungry, access to health care choices, that those who are different from us will not be treated differently?

This ancient story stands before us as we, like our spiritual ancestors, enter into a new land, a land of great opportunity. The new land is in many ways different from our old, taken-for-granted life. We have moved beyond the industrial world and are now in an information age with boundless opportunities and challenges. Our global world is one where U.S. influence and power will no longer be dominant, where a population of many languages, ethnic groups and religious traditions can be seen either as a threat or a rich tapestry. Indeed, our reality is as new as it was for Joshua and the people of Israel.²

What is before us in our society, as it was previously for Joshua and his household, are decisions about who is our God and our neighbor.

¹ John Holbert, "Whom Will You Choose?"

² Walter Brueggemann, "Making the God Decision"

The God that we remember and worship does not desire selfishness or denigration of the diverse human fabric that he created. Our decision to serve God includes an awareness that those who are present with us – even if they are unlike us – deserve inclusion into the goodness of our community.

And so, God is not looking for us to build statues, but to construct homes, neighborhoods and faith communities of welcome and acceptance. God desires that our statutes – spoken and written – reflect the graciousness and goodness that we have received, and the commitments that we have made. Others around us might be skeptical because it is all too easy to forget and go back to our old ways, but God wants us to always remember whom we serve. AMEN.