

Dinner Invitation

a sermon
by Dan Griswold
Trinity Reformed Church
August 26, 2018

Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–18

To continue the theme of food we've been in for a few weeks: I've already admitted to you that I like to eat. A lot!

I probably have this in common with at least a few of you. No offense intended.

And besides being fond of eating I also like eating out. A lot!

Maybe I have this, too, in common with at least a few of you. No offense intended.

I've been to many, many restaurants. And over time I've become somewhat picky. The days are long past when I would be excited about going to MacDonald's. My little heart no longer goes pitter-patter at the thought of going to Ponderosa Steakhouse. (Each of these was an extra-special outing with my maternal grandparents).

Now days, my preference is not for fast food but for something quite a bit slower, a place where

you sit down
and look at the menu
and figure out what you're going to eat
and you tell the waiter or waitress what you want
and you find it is brought to you
and you eat
and it is delicious.

As I said, I've become somewhat picky. I have my standards.

Some of that is because Tammi is such an outstanding cook, and I, too, know a bit about cooking.

Some of that is because I've been to so many restaurants, from the great to the greatly disappointing and everything in-between.

Some of that is because I'm a cheapskate and I hate feeling like I've wasted my money on something that is not so good.

Now with all my experience with restaurants, it doesn't include working in one. I've never been a waiter, or a bartender, or a cook, or a dishwasher. I've never served customers, ones like me who can be picky (or more likely just take a really long time to decide what to order), and others who can be really horrible.

So I try to be understanding. I try to be appreciative. I try to treat restaurant servers with the respect they are due as human beings. Even as they serve me.

We don't like hierarchies much these days. We believe deeply in the equality of all people (or at least we say that we do). We're not comfortable with imbalances of power, especially when those imbalances are abused.

These feelings and comfort zones are all challenged a bit in restaurants, where some serve others, taking the role of servant in an experience of dining. Here, servers and served alike repeat an ancient expression of inequality and hierarchy, in which those who prepared and provided food to another were servants or maybe even slaves.

We don't much like that. It makes us uncomfortable. Even though the conventions of food service still subtly enforce and even require a bit of formal inequality, and the roles of server and served are different and defined, we know not to push it too far, that beyond this restaurant dance of serving and being served we are equals.

But that's not how it is when it comes to our relationship with God.

With God, the relationship is fundamentally one of servant and master.

Or should be.

Before God, we are in the role of servant. The relationship is not one of

equals,
peers,
buddies,

but rather one of

higher and lower,
superior and inferior,
divine and human.



“Choose now whom you will serve.”

That's what Joshua told the people. Choose now which god you will serve, either one (or several) of the gods and idols and deities of their ancestors and neighbors, *or*, well, *God*, the one true God,

who had loved them,
and blessed them,
and saved them,
and guided them.

“Choose now whom you will serve.”

When Joshua tells them this, there's no question about *whether* they will be servants, only *whom* they will serve. Either they will serve the Lord, or they will serve

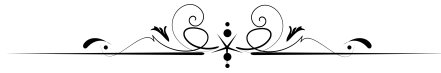
other gods,
the gods of others,
false gods,
regional deities,
imagined divinities of sun, moon, and stars,
projections of human desires and fears,
dreamed up personifications

of power and force,
of honor and war,
of life and blood,
of fertility and sex.

Either one, or the other.

“Choose now whom you will serve.”

Because they *will* serve something, or someone. Either God, or something else: a pretend god, an imagined deity, an idol.



“Choose now whom you will serve,” Joshua tells them.

And he tells us.

We have to serve. We must serve. We can't but serve.

Our deep-seated compulsion, our innermost need is to bend the knee at the table of something or someone other than ourselves, one either greater than ourselves or which we merely imagine to be greater.

The thing is, rather than serving God, rather than being God's servants, we so often turn to false gods in order to serve them: our own modern-day versions of those ancient deities

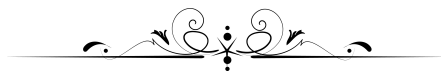
of power and force,
of honor and war,
of life and blood,
of fertility and sex.

John Calvin said that our imaginations are like busy little factories for making idols. We just churn them out! Or, maybe we bake them, cooking them up in our ever-busy industrial capacity kitchens of idol-baking, or making.

We'll seize on whatever raw material is around us and go to work on those. And, pretty soon, out pops an idol, for us to love and adore and serve,

on which we spend much time and money,
in which we seek meaning and purpose,
at which we throw energy and effort.

“Choose now whom you will serve.”



Again and again this choice is before us. Serve God or serve what is not God. Serve God or serve what is far less than God.

It's not that these are equal: God and not-God. They don't exist on the same plane. They aren't in the same orbit.

Yet the choice is ever before us.

You know what choice we often make.

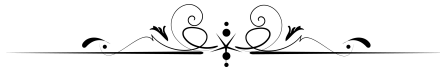
You really do.

Rather than serving God, we serve not-God.

We serve careers.
We serve family.
We serve hobbies.
We serve possessions.
We serve causes.
We serve nation.
We serve our entertainment,
our comfort,
our passions,
our lusts.

Instead of placing God at the center of our lives, we do that with not-God. Instead of being God's servants, we willingly become the servants of not-God, and treat God as a buddy whose central purpose, whose greatest desire, is simply to serve us.

“Choose now whom you will serve.”



Now, I should be clear. The choice to serve God does not mean withdrawing from everything else. It's not about being shut off from all contact. It does not mean, cannot mean, that we must never be in a relationship of some kind of service toward another.

Yesterday, Senator John McCain died. It seemed like it had been only hours since we had learned that he had decided to forgo further treatment for his brain cancer.

There are many tributes to him and condolences to his family that have been written, from varied political and cultural perspectives in this country. I was greatly moved by two of them. Barack Obama had this to say:

John McCain and I were members of different generations, came from completely different backgrounds, and competed at the highest level of politics. But we shared, for all our differences, a fidelity to something higher — the ideals for which generations of Americans and immigrants alike have fought, marched, and sacrificed. We saw our political battles, even, as a privilege, something noble, an opportunity to serve as stewards of those high ideals at home, and to advance them around the world. We saw this country as a place where anything is possible — and citizenship as our patriotic obligation to ensure it forever remains that way.

And this from George W. Bush:

Some lives are so vivid, it is difficult to imagine them ended. Some voices are so vibrant, it is hard to think of them stilled. John McCain was a man of deep conviction and a patriot of the highest order.

The phrase “Thank you for your service” seems both so fitting and so inadequate.

There *is* a place for service, even as we can, and may, and must serve God. To make serving others and serving God an either/or is to force a false choice. Because the kind of serving proclaimed and commanded in scripture means agreeing to submit your whole life,

with *all* your values
and choices
and dreams
and desires;

to see and understand and know this one whom you serve

as your beginning and end,
your master,
your Lord,
your God;

to be centered on God with such love and devotion that these fill your whole being, empowering and enabling you

to love others,
to be compassionate to others,
to serve others,
as you remain fully a servant of the Lord.

You see, God has loved you and led you. God has blessed you and guided you. In good times and in hard times, when the road is smooth and the way is rough, through success and failure, God has been there:

leading you,
blessing you,
guiding you,
loving you.

And what God wants in return is no small thing.
God doesn't want a little attention.
God doesn't want a little consideration.
God doesn't want a *part* of your life.
God wants your *whole* life.

To worship God, and none other; to place God at the center of your life, and none other: *that* is the call God makes, the choice God tells us to make, which we must make:

“Choose now whom you will serve.”

But, sadly, we often don't choose, we don't say “yes” to God's call, but instead “maybe” or “later” or (usually) nothing at all.

We hold out, and hold back. We look elsewhere than to God for meaning and purpose and direction. And so we show that these things are more important to us than God is, that these are more godlike to us than God is.

Wealth and comfort,
family and nation,
control and revenge,
traditions and prejudices:

these so often and so easily become all-important to us, taking the place God should have in our lives, the most important place.

“Choose now whom you will serve.”



But there’s a curious thing about this choice we are commanded to make, a deep thing, a grace-filled thing, a thing of holiness and beauty and good news and gospel. And it’s that the choice is an *invitation*. Yes, an invitation. The choice we are told to make is an invitation not only to serve at the table of the Lord *but to be fed there as well*. The choice is a *dinner* invitation: to serve, *and* to be fed.

Because God does the bulk of the work. God does the heavy lifting. God calls you to serve,

humbling yourself in submission to God,
submitting yourself in humility before God;
admitting that you are lowly and God is mighty;
admitting that you are mortal and God is everlasting;
admitting to yourself that you are broken and God is whole,
you are impure and God is holy,
you are servant and God is, ... well, *God*.

But in that call to serve, God has already made ready for you the “how” of your service, as well as its “when” and “why” and “where.”

And God brings you to this mealtime table, where you are to serve, where, when you arrive,

God pulls out a chair for you.
God stoops down to wash your feet.
God speaks strong words of forgiveness into your ear.
God feeds you.
God stretches out God’s own loving arms,
embracing death,
giving life,
a cross-shaped love,
a table-blessing infused with Easter-joy.

“Choose now whom you will serve.”