

Whom Do You Serve? Psalm 23, Tryon FBC, 9/14/08

It has long been said that we become like that which we love. It is true about all that we idolize, and therefore it is critical to be sure we know the God or gods that we most put our trust in, or that we worship. That helps me grasp the importance of God's command, *"..to love Him with all our hearts, mind, soul and strength."* Because in loving God we become like him in all his ways, and enabled to fulfill the second command. We will love our neighbors like we are loved.

The biggest question we face is this: **Whom do we love!?**..... and Whom then do we serve? No doubt each of us is reflecting the character of the God that we believe in and therefore serve! The same is true for a church. The way we see God, the God we have heard proclaimed to us, the God that we have come to believe in, is the core of the character that we will embody.

So, **Whom do you serve?** Even those who DO NOT believe do serve the ideals or lack of them they most espouse. There is an article in this week's Newsweek Magazine by a lady who did not speak to her parents for 12 years. It started with a small disagreement, then rolled over into a feeling of an intruding family, until one day they hung up on each other and never called back. She spoke of the family as living in a *"grudge-holding culture."* They had never talked openly about troubles. There was an unspoken rule around their house: *"Support me in all that I choose, or I write you off, have nothing to do with you. In fact I will have no use for you."* The "deep freeze" could last for days, weeks not speaking in the home where she grew up.

She acknowledged the clannishness of it all. *"All for one, and one for all."* They reflected a God that they saw as self-directed and self-centered. Love Him or Leave Him. No exceptions. Every man for himself! So they lived in a culture of *"love me or be gone!, a*

very small world," she would now confess. I wonder if it was her learning about the God and Father of Jesus Christ, who loves and keeps on loving no matter the cost, who redeems us in the midst of our stubborn pride and sin... if that broke the spell and allowed this family to reconnect.

I think it was. One day after 12 long years, her father sent her a card with 3 beautiful words on it. It said, *"I'm so sorry."* They made contact, caught up on the last years of all the family news and within a few months had a face to face reunion. A few months later, her mother slipped into Alzheimer's and soon never recognized her again. Her advice? Don't do what I did. Never let a day occur that may fill you with regret later....and it's never too late to start over.

The God of the Bible that we serve can be known in Jesus Christ, and unmistakably, we will become like Him if we follow Him. Sadly many Christians do not know the God of the Bible and give lip service to both the scriptures and to the claims of Christ. If you are one of those, I direct your attention to an almost universally known text in the Bible, The 23rd Psalm. Here you can see the God whom the Christian serves.

1.First, **we serve a God who restores SOULS.** This is a GOD SHEPHERDING His flock of precious lambs. God is concerned and attentive to our spiritual and psychological well-being. The Hebrew word 'nephesh' is used for our 'SOULS', meaning the totality of a person, virtually our whole personality as connected to body and mind, circumstances and opportunities. The Hebrew for 'restore' can have one of 2 meanings as used here:

a. One may be that God reclaims or recalls the sheep that are lost, wandering from the family, or, b. that God strengthens and refreshes our hearts as needed. The Bible is not intentionally ambiguous, so we can safely say that it has both of those

meanings. We serve a God whose intention is to keep on strengthening His created children. When we stray, He longingly comes looking for us with loving attention, to RESTORE our souls!

2. Second, **We serve a God who leads His people** to Serenity (or inward calm) and Quiet. So often we hear about the noise pollution of our generation, something like billions of decibels of sound surrounding us constantly, daily, to the point that we become robotic, responders to stimuli without much reasoning through who we are becoming. We essentially do as the culture requires, as the noises direct, as the stimuli prods. As C.S. Lewis said 75 years ago, "We are in danger of reversing our culture with an overload. We may squander our birthright of humanity for a bowl of whatever feeds our hungers at the moment."

Jesus said, "Let your Yes be Yes, and your No be No." He urged us to simplicity of life and thought. Be clear, be conscious, be thoughtful ahead of time... enough to be able to say a clear YES or NO without hesitation or uncertainty. You know who He is, you can know who you are and what you will or will not do, or indulge yourself with, outwardly or inwardly.

God can take a life torn with inner conflict and speak a word of peace. The struggle subsides, the warfare ceases. Jesus said, "*My peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you.*" (John 14:27) That is a peace that never leaves us. We can take shelter under the wings of the Almighty and find our peace in Him. Even the fear of death is transformed to a reasonable anticipation... "*until we meet on the other side!*" And the fear of evil is changed into something that gives us a 'purpose driven life!' His rod of battle, the shepherd's staff of protection are always with us. With these we can strive for making a difference in our world.

3. The Psalm adds one more and even better thought. The theme of the 5-6 verses says, **We serve a God who invites us** to a FEAST, His Banquet Table! He is not only our Savior, He is our Friend!

In Bible times, to invite someone to share a meal with you was the symbol of a covenant, the bond of friendship and loyalty between 2 people! Today we still do some of that, stretching to make a business lunch!or to fill a social obligation. Yet it still holds true, we share a meal with the people we care about and send a message, *"You are important to me!"* We invite people into our homes and tables with whom we share a special bond. Travel back to the High School cafeteria where sitting together is a statement that, *"We are Pals! Teammates! Invincible and close buddies. We stick together!"*

For Christians, the ultimate symbol of the friendship of Jesus Christ is the Lord's Supper. There as Jesus held up the CUP, He said, *"This is my blood pledge of this new covenant of friendship!"* (Matt. 26:28). I tease a great deal with you about the feeding at Tryon First Baptist, and it is among the best and most bountiful anywhere! But I have become convinced that FOOD is one of the best ways we have to say...LOVE!

- Ann Swicord taught me this! This lady in our church in St. Simons First Baptist was praised so much for her delicious 'CARMEL CAKE' that she presented one on their birthday to every one of the young adults in the Sunday School Class which she and her husband EARLE taught faithfully for 25 years! How did she do that? She baked ahead! Earle bought a huge freezer for their garage where Ann kept a number of cakes prebaked and ready to be delivered! She believed, "FOOD SAYS LOVE!" Jesus proved He did too!

The oil is healing balm and a signal that God cherishes the identifying moments that remind us that we are His own. The overflowing CUP is opportunities and possibilities unending.

4. Verse 2 says, **We serve a God who Guides His people...**

"the sheep beside still waters." John attests to that experience in his gospel (10:27), *"He knows the way and His sheep recognize His voice and trust Him."* Again in the Bible, the Hebrew has 2 possible meanings for *"the valley of the shadow of death."* It certainly refers to death, but the shadow is the dominant idea, the darkness that Job speaks of (38:17) and Jeremiah experienced (2:6) means the times in our lives when things are so bleak and without hope that it feels like dying, or when dying would be a welcome release from such painfulness. It can mean depression; have you ever been depressed? It can refer to deep sorrow, to inconsolable grief, to overwhelming problems, it can mean when we are hopeless and helpless! But it definitely means God is with us in those times. In the darkest times He is most assuredly close to you, closer than your own breath. Our God is a Guide when we cannot see the way, because He surely can! That is exceptionally good news for a church, for any congregation that will take the time to seek God's DIRECTIONS!

5. "My Cup overflows!" The Psalmist tells what his life has been like. **We serve a God who gives more than the necessities;** His blessings are above and beyond what we need or deserve. They come freely, surrounding us and defining our lives, fortifying us for every day that is a tough day. Though life is not always easy, there is a traceable thread that runs through it all. We can *"see His hand of blessing!"* as the hymn writer says.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me!" What well known words! Another compelling picture is created by the Hebrew word

chosen. God's goodness and mercy come "chasing after us!" Is that too pretty a picture, or 'Pollyanna-ish' for our experience?

Here is a promise I can make to you. Every believing Christian who made the Christian faith more than a world view, more than a religious structuring of life, more than a comforting life position to assume.....Any faithful follower who takes God as a shepherding guide and friend to trust through every day of life, come what may..... and anyone who has kept the fight and finished the course....Among these there has never been one who has been disappointed by the Shepherd. Not one.

The God we serve will lay down His very life for His sheep. Will you join the flock of God and make this commitment.....

"And I will dwell... in the HOUSE of the LORD FOREVER!"

That good confession is both... yours to God, and God's to you.

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(I Need to trim 400 words!!!! To stay within 17-18 minutes)