

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

August 25, 2024 (Proper 16, Year B)
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-59

There was a news story I read a few years ago that really moved me. An American priest and missionary named John Kaiser had died in Kenya. He was a Minnesota native, and he had worked in Kenya for the last 36 years of his life. But Kaiser was an outspoken critic of the Kenyan government's human rights record. He had accused two government officials of instigating YEARS of bloody tribal clashes, just to STEAL the land left behind by the fighting. He had also recently been involved in a rape case against a prominent politician. And FOR of all his work fighting injustice in Kenya, he was assassinated.

Kaiser's sister described him like this: "John has always had a great regard for the WELFARE of people, especially the poor. He's dedicated his life to that. He's had a commitment to God. Whatever he did, it was done FIRST out of love for God, and secondly out of love for humans."

It sounds like Father Kaiser had taken to heart Joshua's challenge in our first reading: In everything he did, every day of his life, his first thought was always HOW he could serve the Lord. He LIVED Joshua's words: "Choose this day whom you will serve? ...But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

The words are beautiful, and many of us have them hanging on a wall inside our homes. Those familiar words remind us of our COMMITMENT to the Lord.

But let's not miss the RESPONSE of the people here. The response in our reading is equally beautiful.

They said, ^{24:16} "Far be it from US that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. ¹⁸...Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

Those words are so finely crafted that they could have been sung years later at the temple as part of the worship, and they probably were. They've been with us for thousands of years, and they've stood the test of time.

A PRESENT-day Jewish man was once asked, "After everything your people have been through, with all the persecution and the holocaust, HOW can you still believe? How can you STILL be a Jew?" He responded, "My people have been faithful since Father Abraham, THOUSANDS of years ago—who am I to give up that faith now?" That sounds familiar. It's the same thing his ancestors said: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods."

What they're saying is that our faith in God is BIGGER than just us. We are part of a CHAIN of faith, handed down from generation to generation to generation, for HUNDREDS of generations. Who are WE to take it so lightly?

At the Olympic games in Paris in 1924, the sport of canoe racing was added to the list of international competitions. The favorite team in the four-man canoe race was the United States team. One member of that team was a young man by the name of Bill Havens.

As the time for the Olympics neared, it became clear that Bill's wife would give birth to their second child about the time that Bill would be competing in the Paris Games. Now, in 1924 there weren't any jet airliners from Paris to the U.S., only slow-moving ocean-liners. And so, Bill found himself in a dilemma. Should he go to Paris and risk NOT being at his wife's side when their child was born? Or should he withdraw from the team and remain behind. Bill's wife INSISTED that he go to Paris. After all, he'd been working towards this for years. It was the culmination of a life-long dream.

Clearly the decision wasn't EASY for Bill to make. Finally, after a lot of soul searching, Bill decided to withdraw from the competition and remain behind with his wife, so that he could be WITH

her when their child arrived. Bill considered being at her side a HIGHER priority than going to Paris to fulfill a life-long DREAM.

To make a long story short, the United States four-man canoe team WON the gold medal at the Paris Olympics. And Bill's wife was LATE in giving birth to her child. SO late in fact, that Bill COULD have competed in the event and returned home in TIME for the birth.

People said, "What a shame." But Bill said he had NO regrets. After all, his commitment to his wife was MORE important. A high price to pay, yes, but NOT TOO high a price, for someone he loved.

In our Gospel reading today, many of Jesus' disciples thought that kind of commitment and faithfulness was TOO much to ask. They said, "This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?" And many of them turned back that day in Galilee. But there were twelve who WERE committed. Peter spoke for them: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

The words are familiar: We sing them most Sundays in our liturgy before we read the gospel. But they're MORE than just words; they're a statement of faith. "To whom ELSE shall we go?"

It's NOT like we don't have any OTHER CHOICES. We live in a world of OPTIONS: other religions, new age religions, other places to be, other things to do. But Jesus is MORE than just an OPTION.

We say, "Lord, who else can we turn too? Only you have the words of eternal life." It's a statement of faith. We believe that this Jesus is the same person that created life; the same person that sustains life. Jesus IS life, and NOTHING in our lives MEANS anything WITHOUT him. Nothing GOOD in our lives is POSSIBLE without him. Jesus Christ is the Lord, God incarnate, God with us.

The world is continually feeding us lies, about what to believe and what to do. But the truth is in Peter's words: "Lord, to whom shall we go? YOU have the words of eternal life." THAT is the truth. Christ alone gives life. Christ has given us new life in Baptism and Christ CONTINUES to give us life through His Word and this gift of his body and blood— THAT'S the truth. Our faith in Christ is the ONLY thing that really gives life MEANING.

The world will never stop trying to draw us away from God. But our hearts yearn for truth. We long to hear it in our fellowship, and in our prayer, and in our personal reading of the Bible, and in our service.

Service -- we see THAT truth at work here in communities all the time. I once lived in a community that was hit by a natural disaster, a flood. Even before the call went out for volunteers, they were there, hundreds of volunteers. Over 20,000 hours of service were recorded to save people's homes, and who knows how many hours weren't recorded.

Why were so many there EVERY day to lend a hand? It's because, when we hear what's happening, how a family who can't help themselves is BEING helped, we just know in our hearts that it's the RIGHT thing to do, and we want to be a PART of that. GOD PUTS that in our hearts. God INSPIRES us to serve others. THAT'S the truth.

It's a RADICAL and LIFE-CHANGING truth. It's too big, it's TOO important to leave for a flood that happens ONCE in 500 years. Or leave it for JUST SUNDAY.

There's a sequel to the story of Bill Havens, that Olympic canoer. The child eventually born to Bill and his wife was a boy, whom they named Frank. Twenty-eight years later, Bill received a cablegram from Frank. It was sent from Helsinki, Finland, where the 1952 Olympics were being held. The cablegram read, and I quote: "Dad, I won. I'm bringing home the gold medal you lost while waiting for me to be born." Frank Havens had just won the gold medal for the United States in the canoe-racing event (the 10,000 meter canoe singles), a medal his father had dreamed of winning but never had the chance.

There's a sequel to OUR acts of commitment as well – our commitments to one another, and our commitment to God. In them, you become part of something much BIGGER than just yourself — you become the NEXT link in the great CHAIN of love and faith, handed down from one generation to the next, for THOUSANDS of years. Who are WE to take that lightly?

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You, and ONLY you, have the words of eternal life." Amen.