

Overflowing Allegiance

First message in the 2021 Stewardship Focus “Overflowing”

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- Joshua 24:14-15 (New Revised Standard Version) ¹⁴ “Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”
- 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 (New International Version) ¹ And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. ⁵ And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.

If I were to say the word “allegiance,” I bet that for many of you, the first thing that comes to mind is the “Pledge of Allegiance.” That little verse is intended to instill patriotism and an appreciation for citizenship in this country. By reciting those words in that memorable childlike cadence, we offer or promise or pledge our loyalty and allegiance to a particular pattern of fabric designed to symbolize our country and the values it strives to achieve: liberty and justice... for all.

Of course, that’s not the only allegiance we promise throughout our lives.

Girls and boys joining the scouting movement make oaths and promises to pursue and advance the organizations’ values such as loyalty to God and country, and seeking to be helpful to others in all they do.

Many of us make a vow of allegiance when we marry – a vow intended to endure “until death do us part.”

Next month’s general election is a chance for every citizen to express his or her allegiance, perhaps to certain issues, or particular candidates, or to the aspirations and commitments expressed in the platforms of political parties.

On a lighter note – but then again, maybe it’s just as serious – to varying degrees, many of us have allegiances to our beloved Browns or Indians or Buckeyes or some other team. We’ll be loyal to them through thick or thin... like a new Presbyterian minister I just met who’s serving in Ashtabula County. Though he came here from Maryland, he is an Ohio native, so he’s glad to be back in a place where people will accept and appreciate his allegiance to his beloved Cleveland Browns... an allegiance confirmed by the name he gave his St. Bernard puppy: Barker Mayfield.

Yes, we all speak words of allegiance at various times, to various institutions, for various reasons. And there are some allegiances that are never verbalized but are passionately embraced. Maybe you’ve had the privilege of being a new parent. Remember looking upon your newborn, amazed at the beautiful, tiny new life you’d brought into the world. Even without words you offered a vow to protect and nurture that precious one, feeling the powerful commitment to that child overflowing with love.

Each of us can claim allegiance to many institutions, people, things. But as Christians, every other allegiance is rooted in our trust in God because we know and embrace the way of Jesus the Son. Our allegiance to God in Christ is to guide how we see the world and how we engage the world.

In today's New Testament selection Paul gave an example: the Christians in the province of Macedonia. Here's some background to help you understand the significance of what they did.

The Christian faith which arose in Jerusalem was spread by the apostles and Paul and others through Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, Africa. At the same time that Christian communities took root in those outlying areas, the Christian believers back in Jerusalem began to suffer. Instances of persecution of Christians became more common. People in the synagogues grew tired of hearing Christian claims that the long-awaited messiah had come in Jesus of Nazareth. We can imagine that along with their religious views being criticized, the social and business lives of Christ-followers suffered, too.

In a previous letter to the Corinthians Paul had announced a collection to benefit the persecuted Christians in Jerusalem. Paul had invited the Corinthian Christians to join in that offering, but they hesitated. In the meantime Christians in the impoverished cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Beroea had already produced generous offerings for the Jerusalem Christians.¹ So we read in 2 Corinthians that Paul followed up with the Christians in Corinth, inviting them to join in this collection for this offering of mercy.

He pointed out to the Corinthians how it was that the poor churches in Macedonia could find a way to take part in this act of generosity. It was possible, Paul explained in verse 5, because, "They gave themselves first of all to the Lord...."²

Their allegiance to serving God by following the way of Jesus enabled them to do what seemed unlikely if not impossible. As impoverished and strained as they were, they were able to participate in a special collection to benefit the persecuted Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul said that they begged to be allowed to "[share] in this service to the Lord's people."

Paul said that their generosity exceeded anyone's expectation.

How was that possible? Again, in Paul's words, "They gave themselves first of all to the Lord...."³

Sisters and brothers in Christ, that is our heritage. Our ancestors in faith have a history of "putting first things first," of making sure that our allegiances are in the proper order.

Here's what I mean. After Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness to the edge of the Promised Land of Canaan, he passed the reigns of authority to Joshua. Joshua called the Israelites to consider what or who warranted their primary allegiance: he asked, "Are you going to hang on to the superstitions and former loyalties and habits that distract you, or are you going to dedicate yourselves to serving the God who brought you from captivity to opportunity, from Egypt to Canaan?" Joshua then put it

¹ Ernest Best, *Interpretation—a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching: Second Corinthians*, Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1987, 77

² 2 Corinthians 8:4-5 New International Version

³ 2 Corinthians 8:5b New International Version

to them plainly. In Joshua Chapter 24, verses 14-15 he declared : “Decide today whom you will serve.... As for my family and me, we will serve the Lord.”⁴

Or how about when Jesus walked along the shores of the Sea of Galilee as he began his ministry. He called to some fishermen there named Peter and Andrew, then to James and John. “Follow me,” he urged them. “You’ll still be fishermen, but you’ll bring in people, not fish.”⁵ He asked for their allegiance, to give themselves first of all to the one who would become their Lord, their Teacher, their Master and Savior.

This month our focus in worship is on “(Re)-discovering that our lives are overflowing in thanks to God.” We re-discover how blessed we are when we recall our primary allegiance: God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Psalm 100 declares,

Know that the Lord is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;

we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.⁶

How easily we forget that “it is God who made us,” that we belong to God. We need to restore that focus in our lives.

I’m sure you know that most mobile phones today have a camera function. For some people, that’s the most important feature of their phone. As we video-chat or shoot pictures or video, most of the time we look at ourselves on the screen of our smartphone.

But the camera function has a button you can press so that the smartphone switches from looking at yourself to looking at what’s in front of you. That’s the view of life we need to recover: not looking only at ourselves, but seeing God’s blessings that overflow in our lives. Remembering that “it is the Lord who made us and we are his” reminds us that our lives overflow with reasons for thankfulness because God is in our lives and we are in God’s heart.

We all embrace many allegiances, many loyalties that enrich and shape our lives. But let us give ourselves first of all to the Lord, to whom we owe our primary allegiance. As we give God our allegiance, we (re-) discover how our lives overflow in thanks to God.

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⁴ See Joshua 24:14-15

⁵ See Matthew 4:18-22

⁶ Psalm 100:3 New Revised Standard Version