

Who Do You Serve?

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Pullman, WA
August 9, 2020

Ancient Witnesses: Joshua 24:1, 14-15

There's a story about theologian, Paul Tillich. One day a student approached him and said, "Professor, I'm sure that your class is interesting, but I don't believe in God." Tillich said to him, "So tell me about this God that you don't believe in." After the student described his idea of God, Tillich finally said, "You know, I don't believe in that God, either."

There are many people who are finding that the God of their childhood is no longer believable. The finger-shaking God of requirements somehow leaves us cold and unsatisfied. Biblical scholar, Marcus Borg, called this way of thinking about God "supernatural theism." This a God who is a being, separate from the universe and who created the universe a long time ago. This is a God who is "out there," intervening in the natural order once in a while, but "not here" most of the time. This is a God who is a controlling power, an unchanging static entity.

Like Tillich, I have more in common with the doubters and questioners. I say with them, "I don't believe in that God, either." I also reject a God that is all-powerful and determines what happens in our lives. When it comes to most of my Christian brothers and sisters, maybe we just worship a different God.

More and more people are saying of this model: "If that's what God is, I don't believe in it." And I hardly blame them. Christianity is shrinking and fading into irrelevancy.

But let me come at this from a different angle: *We all have a god. The question is not if you have a god. The question is, **what** is your god.*

Again, Tillich is helpful here. He described faith as "ultimate concern." So whatever is the object of our faith, the object of our ultimate concern, *that* is our god. So for Tillich, faith is not belief. It is not simply saying *that* God exists or that a higher power or spiritual force exists. Rather, faith is *trusting in* something. We can believe that something exists and not trust it and not have faith in it! Faith *in* something means that it is the most important thing in your life. It is your ultimate concern. It is your top priority. So when we put it this way, *what is your god?*

In a way, if we are being honest, you can say that we are all polytheists. That is, we have many gods that are competing for our ultimate concern—financial security, achievement, comfort, status, safety, recreation, having fun, romantic love—many gods competing for the top spot. There are also one's allegiance to political party, the military, the free market, one's nation. None of these are necessarily bad things, but there is a problem when any one of these demands our worship, becomes our god, and commands ultimate allegiance. According to Jesus, even one's family can become a false god if it becomes a substitute for the inclusive and broad priorities of God. You must love the pathway to God more than your father, mother, spouse, children, brother or sister. (Luke 14:26)

And if you want to know what your god is, look at how you spend your time and energy and focus. If the most important thing in your life, for example, is athletics, and if you put all of your time, all of your focus, all of your heart, all of your trust and your happiness—that is your god. That is where you hitch your wagon.

So what makes something “god” is not objective characteristics or qualities. What makes something “god” is if it is trusted, if it is a priority in one’s life, if it is one’s singular devotion, if it is loved with all of one’s heart, mind and strength.

“Hear O Israel, I am the Lord, your God. You shall love the Lord, your God, with all of your heart and mind and strength.” Jesus called this the Greatest Commandment!

So, if you want to know what your God is—what do you serve? Where do you put your time? Your energy? Your resources? Your heart? There you will find your god. Where your treasure is, there your heart is. And where your heart is, there is your god, your faith, your ultimate concern.

Jesus said, you can’t serve two masters. For example, you cannot serve both God and mammon. You can’t be ultimately concerned with both God on one hand, and greed and wealth on the other. As Bob Dylan wrote, “You’ve gotta serve somebody... It may be the devil or it may be the Lord. But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”

And so, what is your master? What do you serve? That is your god. Where do you find your security? Where do you find your treasure?

Recently in this pandemic and economic collapse, in the CARES Act the government gave the bulk of the assistance, \$4.5 trillion, to corporations and Wall Street, while a small portion went toward helping working families and the poor. Meanwhile, states and cities face budget disaster, millions have lost health insurance, millions are facing eviction, schools are in dire need of help, small businesses are dying and 30 million people said they did not get enough food last week.

What priorities does this reflect? What god are we serving as a nation? The God of compassion or the god of trickle-down economics?

And yesterday the President issued an order to defund Social Security and Medicare in the guise of helping workers by deferring the payroll tax. This will create a shortfall that will be used as justification to cut future benefits to seniors who have earned these benefits and depend upon them. When we do this as a nation, who does this serve?

What kind of god do we serve, when we can’t be bothered to be informed about policies and laws that bring suffering to millions of people?

What kind of god do we serve, when our government cuts billions of dollars for healthcare and food assistance for poor men, women and children, while giving two trillion dollars in tax breaks for billionaires?

What kind of god do we serve, when we spend more on our military than the next twelve nations combined, refusing to trim this down even in a national emergency?

What kind of god do we serve, when our congress is unwilling to pass laws to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that are killing our planet?

When we have “In God We Trust” printed on our money, it begs the question—in *which* god do we trust?

My dad loved to say, “Actions speak louder than words.” What is your god? Your actions will reveal it to you more than anything. Louder than words. “You shall have no other gods before me,” says the ancient text. You shall have no greater allegiances.

Who are we serving if we refuse to wear a mask amongst others in public, even if it can help save lives? Even if others are rightly frightened and vulnerable?

Shall we serve the god of self, concerned only with *my* freedom, *my* desires, *my* comfort? Or shall we serve the God of respect and love for our neighbor? Shall we serve the god of *me*? Or the God of *we*? In every little thing, we gotta serve somebody.

And so the question of what our god is, is not simple at all. It’s a struggle, if we’re honest. It’s a struggle to make love and justice our god! It’s a struggle to make peace our ultimate concern! It’s a struggle to put our trust in Oneness and Spiritual Wisdom! It requires work and effort.

It requires us to be alert and to choose, instead of unconsciously acquiescing to the priorities of those who ruthlessly acquire power and money. Like Joshua, may we make a conscious choice and say, “as for me and my house, we will serve the Holy One.”

Where our hearts are will determine whom we serve. So in worship we begin with words, but the goal is to move it to the heart. That is what we do every Sunday when we worship: we practice putting the Sacred Presence, love and justice, at the top of our priorities. The goal is to love justice, to love compassion, and to love peace with all of our heart, soul and mind. The goal is make this way of love and justice our Master, our ultimate concern and our God and finding an unshakable, indestructible internal peace and joy.

As the poet Iain Thomas wrote:

And every day, the world will drag you by the hand, yelling, “This is important! And this is important! And this is important! You need to worry about this! And this! And this!” And each day, it’s up to you to yank your hand back, put it on your heart and say, “No. This is what’s important.”

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)