

"When you read the sermon for yourself - try to hear Pastor Paula's tone and pace of speech. This sermon is written to be spoken and may not be grammatically correct. If you would like to hear it go to the UCC Sanbornton YouTube channel any time - search for the date the sermon was given." Pastor Paula

Sermon

August 22, 2021

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18

In today's reading, Joshua outlines for the people how they are to live entering a new land. He heeds them to learn from their ancestor's experience in the exodus and their time in the wilderness. He reminds them of the faithfulness of YHWH caring for them along the journey. He confronts the people with a decision they must make. Will they enter into an exclusive relationship with the one who has already acted to save them, or will they serve the new gods of the land they are about to enter?

Joshua couches this challenge in a question about commitment saying: (quote) "make the decision today whom you will worship, even if it is the gods of your ancestors beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you live. **As for me and my household, we will worship and follow YHWH.** The people responded that they would do the same: (quote)"Far be it from us to abandon YHWH to worship other gods.... We too will serve YHWH, who is our God." Later in Chapter 24, Joshua seals the deal by creating a Covenant for the people that day there at Shechem. He made it official, spelling it out in great detail their promise, their commitment. To follow and serve only YHWH – no other Gods.

Of course, the challenge Joshua issued to the Israelites so long ago, also confronts us today. We too must choose or at the very least recommit to whom we will serve and what kind of people we will be. This is an important question for us to be asking during this interim time. Whom will we serve and what kind of people, what kind of church do we want to be?

A story I recently read, I think, will help us wrap our heads around the importance of exploring our own purpose, our own commitments and covenants as a church. The story is about a kind of local guy, a CEO and business owner in Maine. Eighteen years ago, Tom Chappell, CEO of the natural toothpaste company *Tom's of Maine*", he was 43 years old at the time and had just guided the company through a period of aggressive growth, so now he had more money than he ever dreamed of. But he was feeling drained—emotionally and spiritually. The usual advice for business leaders when they hit this point is for them to sell the business, buy a sailboat and sail the world. But Tom's direction came from a question his pastor's wife asked him. She asked: "*What makes you think 'Tom's of Maine' isn't your ministry?*" Tom wondered about this and prayed.

This question changed everything for Tom. He decided to stay with the company half time and at the same time enroll in Harvard Divinity School. Business continued to do well and the employees suggested to Tom that he devote full time to seminary and "Stay and Pray" as they put it. After four years of seminary Tom, with some help from his seminary friends drafted a mission statement and a road map for the business based on moral and ethical principles. As a result, Tom promised to honor its commitments to all of its stakeholders, including employees, owners, vendors, consumers, the community and the

environment. Tom Chappell challenged his company to decide what sort of a business it would be—one driven only by the bottom line or one with allegiances to moral and ethical principles for the common good of all.

Tom's story encourages each of us to question where are my personal priorities, and as a church community, we too need to ask ourselves what are our priorities? What is our purpose? What is the ministry God is calling us to do in this place, at this time up on the hill in Sanbornton?

Lately, I've had the feeling that many of the members of this congregation are feeling discouraged with the number of people attending church whether in-person or on-line, and the number of people willing and able to help out. Maybe it's because I come with new eyes that I see how wonderful this church family is and all the possibilities.

Church is not just this beautiful church building, you know that! **You** were all still church for months when we couldn't be inside the building. I see so many possibilities with this church becoming even more vibrant than it already is. The Transition Team is reading a book called "Part-Time is Plenty: Thriving without Full-Time Clergy". One of the key ideas in this book is that small churches, with part-time pastors can and are vibrant, important parts of their community. You don't have to have a multi-staffed church to make a difference in your community. But you need to identify your priorities, your passions, and to take the time to explore the needs of the community. Church is not only about those of us here on Sunday morning – whether in person or on-line. It's about following Jesus, sharing the Good News and serving our community and beyond.

During the Interim Time, it is my role to guide and help you all to discern what are your priorities? What is your purpose? What are this church families' gifts and passions and how can you align them with the needs of the community? **You and you and you** – no one person has to do everything or go it alone; we have neighbors, we can have other partners in the community working together for the benefit of all. This community is rich with people who care deeply about Sanbornton and want it to thrive as well.

It's not about looking back – the phrase “we used to” needs to go...no it's about looking forward. What does this community need? What are the gifts that this church has to offer the community?

We may need to look with new eyes at the space – how can the church utilize the space we have? Can the space be used and rented out by others? Does your board and committee structure support your priorities or do they create barriers to moving forward. I'm reading a book titled “We Aren't Broke” by Mark Elsdon. The opening line in the forward says the following: (I quote)“The good news here is in the title: We Aren't Broke”. Nor is it broke spiritually or missionally. It is, however, ripe for renewal...” (unquote)

That's this church – not broke, spiritually, missionally or financially – don't let a good idea be put aside because “we don't have the money”. You all know that's not totally true! When you wanted something, you went for it...you wanted your organ to be upgraded and look – it happened with lots of dedicated

hard work and resources you are so close to reaching that goal. It was a priority so it happened. What's next?

What does the town of Sanbornton need? The Transition Team is working diligently towards helping the congregation explore the church priorities, identify passions, hopes and dreams. In just a few weeks you will be given a link to a questionnaire on Survey Monkey, that the Transition team designed to identify some of these answers. We need every individual – not just one person in the family, but each individual to answer the questionnaire. It's only 10 questions – it won't take long. Please give us your honest answer, raise your honest concerns and joys, tell us your hopes and dreams – each person's feedback will help to develop a complete picture of the direction the church wants to go in the future. With your direction envisioned you will be better able attract and call the pastor who best will serve along side of you in this community.

Going back to the story of Tom Chappell and his toothpaste business – he was spiritually and emotionally tired. What did he do? He turned to God...went to seminary and found his business was his mission field. He discovered that for him he needed to be a moral and ethical person – committed to following Jesus. Caring for his employees, contractors and the community around him was more important than building stock piles of money for himself. We too need to turn to God at this time. Every one of us should have this church on their prayer list, asking for guidance and praying for the settled pastor to come.

The scripture that Bill read for us today is perfect for us today. Joshua tells the people to learn from their ancestor's experiences – we too need to be reminded that in its 250 years we too have come through difficult time and can learn from our ancestors: moving the entire church building to a new location, beloved pastors and not so beloved ones, digging out the Undercroft and becoming an Open and Affirming Church. Those were difficult times – united, our ancestors brought us to this place. God has been guiding us for 250 years and will be guide us for the next 250 years as well. We too will come through this time – sharing the GOOD NEWS of God's love, Jesus' compassion and justice, and the presence of the Holy Spirit

As individuals and as a church, to be effective in our mission and ministry and life, each day we need to ask ourselves Joshua's question: "make the decision today whom you will worship, and follow."

Like Joshua, can we say – **for me and my household, we will serve YHWH?"**

**Amen**