

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
“Everybody’s Got to Serve Somebody”
Revelation 2:12-17, Numbers

He had had it. The guy was getting on his nerves. My friend J.D. had been a draftsman and designer in the petrochemical industry since the early fifties. He was one of the most respected men in the business. So it bugged him that one of the new engineers in the firm was questioning almost every one of his decisions. And it really bugged him because this engineer had been out of school less than a year and had only recently received his license. One day J.D. had finally had enough. After one more meeting with the young engineer J.D. got up from his drafting table, walked across the large room in which all of us draftsmen were working and went into the office of the lead project engineer and shut the door. A little while later the door opened, the lead engineer and J.D. shook hands. The lead engineer then walked across the room to the office of the young engineer and shut the door. A few minutes later the door opened and the young engineer emerged, walked across the room, said a few words to J.D. and slinked back to his office. J.D. then wandered by my desk and said, “Just remember John, everybody is somebody’s boy.”

I realize that while that language might not appeal to everyone, I will alter to the words used by Bob Dylan, “Your gonna have to serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but your gonna have to serve somebody.” For those of us who have been around the block a time or two we realize just how true this is. Whether it is a boss, stockholders, a spouse or simply the government, we all have to serve somebody. And this fact was not lost on the Christians in Pergamum. They were reminded of it each and every day for two reasons. The first was that at the high point of the city was a monstrous temple to Zeus, the head of the Greek Pantheon. This is what John referred to as the throne of Satan. The second reason was the Pergamum had pioneered the worship of the Emperor. They did so in order to curry favor with Rome and win trade concessions. So each day as the Christians in Pergamum arose they were faced with the decision...whom would they serve. Their choice, even in the face of death was Christ. For this choice they are praised by Christ. Which again, as with the other churches, raises the question, what is wrong?

The simple answer is that they were still vulnerable to serving Zeus and Caesar. But what is fascinating is that the vulnerability is not from the outside but from the inside of the community. This is all the language about Balaam. Now for most of us the story of Balaam in the book of Numbers is not a familiar one. So here the Readers Digest version. Balaam was a prophet for hire. You could hire him for birthday party blessings and enemy cursings. The enemies of Israel hired him to curse Israel. When Balaam tried to do this, God prevented him and instead made him bless Israel. While that may seem to make him a hero rather than a threat, his story did not end there. Ultimately what Balaam does is to tell Israel that they do not have to follow all of God’s laws; that they can fudge on certain basic principles of faith...one of which was to intermarry with those who worshipped other gods and goddess. The result of this

teaching was the Israel slowly slipped away from God a little bit at a time. What Jesus is telling the church is that if we listen to those who say we can follow Jesus only 90% of the time, then the temptation is to slip away in small but steady increments.

I realize that many of us might have a hard time seeing how that would be so. So let me offer an historical observation. In the Second World War as my friend J.D. sloshed his swag across Europe those he was fighting were Christians. They went to church. They had been baptized. They took communion and celebrated Christmas and Easter. They had chaplains. So how could they do what they did to Jews, gypsies and others? The answer comes in that what they were told in the church was that while their souls belonged to God their bodies belonged to the state. They were told that they were to serve the Reich and not Christ in what they did and how they lived. This same sense of whom we will ultimately serve comes at us from multiple directions. Our corporations tell us that we must serve them first. Our schools or sports teams tell us that there are our primary obligation. I knew some band directors in Texas who made it clear to their students that band was the first obligation in their lives above everything else. When we in the church acquiesce to these demands then our lives become skewed and our choices are not always those Christ would have us to make.

So what then are we to do? There are two possibilities. The first is that we can search out all of those Balaams in our midst and expel them so that we become a pure community. This has been the tendency of the church over the years. From the Spanish inquisition to the Puritans of New England who went after the witches in their midst the church has always tried to purify itself. Now if we did this we would have to do it decently and in order. We would form a purity committee and elect a moderator. Then we would send out a theological survey. Once we went through the returns we would do follow-up interviews with those who seemed to be slightly off center in their beliefs. Then once we narrowed the field of possible candidates for the Balaam award we would begin interrogations. We would sit in a dark room sipping our lattes and telling the suspects that if they confess and return to the truth they too could have free Sunday coffee. Or...we could do what Jesus calls upon the church at Pergamum to do...we could refocus our life as a community on following Jesus Christ.

If we take a moment to look back at the words Christ speaks we hear him say, "Repent then." The word repent means to turn around and go another direction. What this implies is that the church is to get back on track following Jesus Christ and not the slightly off track path laid out by those who say it is OK to only follow Christ part way. In a sense it is a matter of focus. Just as companies often need to return to their core businesses the church is called to return to its core focus of following Jesus day in and day out. One way we can do that is by lifting up our Core Values. I have asked the ushers to pass out copies of our Core Values. These values were derived both from scripture and from our mission and focus statements. These are the essentials which we believe are necessary for us to be a healthy and faithful body of Christ. Please notice that the first Core Value is Jesus Christ. This means that all that we say and do is to be dependent upon and directed by our focus on Jesus Christ as the way and the truth and the life. It means that we are acknowledging that the one we serve above all is Jesus Christ. He is the guide and goal of our lives. This I believe is the message that Jesus is offering the church at Pergamum

and here in Birmingham, that by serving Christ we can become the kind of church that we are meant to be.

The challenge before us then is maintaining that focus on serving Christ first and the rest of the world through him? For it is in that focus, in that serving that we truly find our new identity as whole children of God, equipped to serve and transform the world. So how can we do that? I believe we can do that by helping someone else do it...what do I mean? Well this morning we made a promise, that we are to guide and nurture Katherine Skye by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging her to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of this church. So here is my challenge...for each of us to ask ourselves this question, how am I helping Katherine and every other baptized member of this church follow Jesus? If we continually answer that question I believe it will keep us on the right track of serving the one who served us.