

Household Six

A Sermon by

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October 29, 2017

Trinity Presbyterian Church

Anchorage, Alaska

Here we go. We've all experienced stories in life that can begin with the statement, "A funny thing happened on the way to" People of faith are particularly susceptible to funny things happening to them on the way to places they thought they were going. It all kind of goes along with the saying, "You want to make God laugh; make plans." Six months ago, Mary and I didn't have a clue that God was working to move us into position to throw our hats in the ring here at Trinity Presbyterian. We've been marveling at the way the Spirit has worked this process ever since.

Meanwhile, a couple of years ago, your Pastoral Nominating Committee began work to find a new long term spiritual leader. I'd bet that none of them ever thought it would turn out the way it did. It's like, let's go out and find ourselves a nice golden retriever and after a long search a couple of Labrador looking mutts with questionable denominational backgrounds come around. And so, the Labradors are invited to preach and the Pastoral Nominating Committee says, "They followed us home. Can we keep them?" And all the time, God is laughing. But not in a mocking sort of way. God, I truly believe, is rejoicing at bringing together Trinity and us, and happy that everyone paid attention; is listening; and we're ready to go.

One of the things you'll get with me when I preach, will be stories of life experiences that help illustrate the points of my messages. Having recently completed 21 years of military service in the Alaska National Guard means some (okay many) of my illustrations will have a military flavor. I needed to tell you that, because I'm about to tell a story. In fact, today's title, "Household Six", comes from the Army culture. When doing an exercise, or actually being deployed in the Army, everyone gets assigned call signs. When our Alaska infantry brigade was deployed to Afghanistan our brigade call sign was "Grizzly" giving a nod to one of our most majestic and ferocious state animals. Personnel people come from the "staff one" shop, or S-1, so the call sign for our senior personnel officer was "Grizzly-1". All the other staff sections, S-2, S-3, and so forth were "Grizzly 2", "Grizzly 3", etc. The commander was "Grizzly 6". All commanders in the Army possess call signs that end in 6. Sometimes, they are just known as "the 6".

Is everyone following me so far? Commander call signs end with the number six. So, every so often, while we're at work and making social plans with each other, we might ask an Army friend something like, "Hey, you want to go fishing this weekend?" And the answer back might likely be, "That would be great, but I need to check with Household Six" meaning, the spouse. That should be no surprise. I've held the rank of colonel for about three years now, but Mary has been the Major General forever. Household six.

Today, then, we examine two approaches to God in the passage from Matthew. The Pharisees took their turn trying to trap Jesus. Normally theological enemies, the Sadducees (who did not believe in the possibility of a resurrection) and the Pharisees (who believed in a resurrection and hated the Sadducees for their disbelief) were working overtime to discredit Jesus. It was like a heavyweight tag team wrestling match - especially in Matthew 22. Verses 15-22 the Pharisees asked Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar. Then, in the next 10 verses, the Sadducees jump into the ring and ask him about marriage in the afterlife. (It seems they were trying to kill two birds with one stone by not only discrediting Jesus, but also revealing the foolishness of the resurrection.) Then, the Pharisees get back into the mix with the question from one of their top lawyers inquiring of the greatest commandment.

Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." The Pharisees had a problem, an addiction really. It was kind of a legitimate addiction in response to all the past ills spawned by the infidelities throughout the history of Israel. First they covenant with God, then they chase after a shiny object and break the covenant. That goes badly for them, so they covenant with God and soon fall away to dead idols. Again, bad choices lead to disastrous consequences. Finally, after a long series of failures, the unthinkable happens. The people became exiled to Babylonia. God kicked them out of the Promised Land. After around 500 years in exiled bondage, they were finally allowed to return to their homeland and the spiritual leaders of the people set up some rules. No more goofing around. God's chosen people needed to adhere to the law. The theory being that living the law in everything would prevent them from suffering catastrophic consequences again, like being exiled.

A big problem developed for them. The law, ironically, became king and the Divine started taking a back seat. Everything was about the law. All discussions centered on the law. Hardly anyone was talking about God, let alone relationship with God, because they were working on imposing God's law. Can you see the addiction for them? Maybe if they used the law to control everything just right and kept the people in check, then life for God's chosen people might be okay for most and predictably comfortable for the ruling class. The law became Household Six for the Sadducees and Pharisees.

Now look at the answers Jesus gave them all throughout Matthew 22. When it comes to paying taxes to Rome, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” What belongs to Caesar? The money. What belongs to God? Our very lives! To the Sadducees who wondered about marriage in the resurrection Jesus told them they were asking the wrong questions, which always leads to the wrong answers. In the end he told them, “He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” Who are the living? Not those who belonged to Caesar, or even the law, or any other idol. The living are those who belong to God.

God needs to be Household Six. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Put those three things together and God is saying to us, “I want to be in an emotional relationship with you, I want to be in a spiritual relationship with you, and I want to be in a thinking relationship with you.” And God has not instilled any law that says we have to be in relationship. It’s all freedom, baby. To be in a truly loving relationship, means both sides get the freedom to choose. God has already chosen us through the redeeming power of Christ. If we want our lives to be in order/ if we want to live in healing/ if we want to experience the joy/ peace, and love God has to offer/ then God is our Household Six. Or, we can fall behind by choosing other stuff.

My dad, years ago, used to counsel me and my siblings to think out into the future. “What do you want to do and where do you want to be in five years? Ten years?” So I kept trying that, even as a minister, which was silly, because on the one hand I tried following my dad’s advice and on the other- in my own imperfect way - I kept giving my life over to God. If you asked me 30 years ago what my life would look like in my late fifties, I probably would have told you that I’d be serving my final church after a string of successful ministries in progressively larger, bigger, and better churches; all likely in the Midwest. I look at that now and think, “My goodness that was boring.” I made plans. God laughed a lot. “Son, you are going to Alaska, and you’re going to serve churches, and do some Army time, and dutifully get to see some exotic places and, oh by the way, you and Mary in the middle of all that are going to go to Russia and pick up some kids I have in mind for you at an orphanage. Sound like fun? Ha! That’s just the half of it!”

That’s kind of what things look like for me with God as Household Six in command of my life. I alluded a bit as to what it meant for Mary and me to make God Household Six in charge of our family. To borrow a phrase from the more recent adaptation of the movie True Grit, the adult Mattie Ross near the end of the movie remembers her time with Marshall Rooster Cogburn as “lively times.” God, the author of life, is sure to make for lively times. Choosing any other path leads to brokenness and death.

Who possesses the call sign Household Six for Trinity Presbyterian Church? Of course, it must be God. Only God will lead us to proper destinations and use us for

the work of the Kingdom. Lively times are ahead when the orientation of our relationship keeps pointing to Divine glory. I will have failed in this sermon today if you get in your car and drive home thinking God is safe and sound in heaven. I like this from Isaiah 57:15 where God says: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite." In other words, God is busting out of his house to come over to our place and make us alive again. Relationship with you and me is paramount to God and it is upon this relationship, through Christ, that God builds the household of the church.

We cannot keep God safely tucked away in heaven. In the Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis, Mr. Beaver, referring to Aslan the divine Christ-like Lion says, "He is not safe, but he is good." In scripture it promises we are safe and secure in God who is the source of life and lively times. God will keep us from being caught in the traps of dead idols/ dead ideas/ dead actions/ and dead ends. At first, it may not seem so safe, until we discover being involved with the giver of life is the only safe way to go.

Mary and I have always loved canoeing, though our history with it has mostly been on lakes. A few years ago we discovered the joys of river rafting. The key to rafting is similar to understanding a deep relationship with God. In rafting, the river is in charge. The occupants use the paddles merely to ensure the relationship with the river keeps going. If one tries to fight the river, a lot of energy is wasted and the journey is much less enjoyable. The object is to work with the river and let the river help and actually do most of the work.

Choosing relationship with God is very similar. God is willing to do most of the work to make our lives fruitful and peaceful. We just have to get out of the way and allow the Spirit to move us along and take the lead in the relationship. Recently I read from the spiritual giant Oswald Chambers who described what it means to choose a deep relationship with God. "Our Lord never puts personal holiness to the fore when he calls a disciple; He puts absolute annihilation of my right to myself and identification with Himself - a relationship with Himself in which there is no other relationship."

That's what it means to truly make God the commander, Household Six, of our individual lives, the life of our families, and the life of our church. When we devote ourselves in such a way to God, it does not mean we'll be locked away from everything we love. Nay, it's actually the opposite. It means God will give us so much more beauty in life by enriching many, many more relationships along the way. It means God will fill the gaps that cause us anxiety; the gaps of brokenness/ the gaps of troubled relationships/ the gaps of negativity/ the gaps of conflict. All those places of emptiness will be filled with God's eternal love and rest us in the peace that passes all understanding. And God is willing to do most of the work. All we have to

do is say yes to the relationship through Christ Jesus and allow it to go. Household Six, the Divine presence. This is what we're all about. Amen.