

Oct 18

You're Gonna Have to Serve Somebody!

Mark 10:35-45

I want to begin by quoting some of the lyrics of a song by Bob Dylan. Dylan became one of the “cultural” prophets of the 60’s. His songs like “Blowing in the Wind” became hallmarks of the Vietnam War protests. In the 70’s Dylan became a Christian and began to insert Christian themes into his works. In 1979 he recorded “You’re Gonna Have to Serve Somebody” and it won him the male rock vocalist of the year honors. It is a long song that talks about two kinds of people, those who are trying to live by faith and spiritual disciplines and those who are living a “grab what you can out of life” mentality. One verse goes:

You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride
You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side
You may be workin' in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair
You may be somebody's mistress, may be somebody's heir

The chorus, which is repeated often through the song is:

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody

Dylan poses the question that has been confronting the disciples for many chapters through Mark. Jesus predicts three times his death and the responses of the disciples to this message make it clear they do not understand what he is saying. Jesus uses symbols: children, servanthood and slave, to get his message across. They still don’t get it. Ultimately, the question being asked is, “Who are you serving?” because you’re gonna have to serve somebody.

To help us understand what is occurring in the scripture that was shared today we have to back up one verse. It says “and the first will be last and many who are last will be first.” Right after this Mark has Jesus for the third time predicting his death.

Immediately following these two things we have James and John coming to Jesus asking for the preferred seats in the new kingdom they were sure Jesus was about to set up. They totally missed the predictions of his death. They totally missed the idea that the first will be last. All they were focused on was that when a king ruled, his two most trusted advisors sat at his right and left. That is the seats they wanted, the seats of privilege and power. After the first prediction of his death Peter had taken Jesus aside and scolded him for such thoughts to which Jesus had called him an agent of the devil. In their own way, John and James were doing the same thing. They were saying by their question that this predicted death is not going to happen. James and John were two of the three in the Savior's inner circle of disciples. Along with Simon Peter, they witnessed our Lord's Transfiguration and appear in the forefront of many gospel stories. They loved Jesus, and wanted to remain close to him, but they misunderstood what close discipleship entailed.

To go back to Bob Dylan: You're Gonna Have to Serve Somebody! They were wanting to serve the gods of wealth and power. They were in league with the devil and didn't know it!

Let's examine Jesus' response to the question asked by James and John. This time he does not scold them, like he had done with Peter, or as he did when the disciples got into a "who is most important" argument. Jesus' response to James and John was to ask them a question "Can you drink the cup I drink?" They respond with a quick "We can!" Again we have to believe that they were thinking about wealth and privilege, not suffering. Even Jesus, when the time drew near, asked that the cup of suffering be removed from his lips. None of us would eagerly assent to saying yes we could drink that cup, though over time, Christians have had to drink the cup of sacrifice for their faith. Jesus does say that they will drink the cup, and James is the first disciple to die a martyr's death. John, according to legend, lived to an advanced age but suffered greatly for the faith. Then Jesus tells the disciples such a favor was not his to grant. Do you realize who was granted this right? Jesus says to one of them, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Yes, the two thieves were the ones who were at the left and right of Jesus when he came into his glory. So, not only did Jesus deny their claim

for places of privilege but later would model for them the servant mindset they ought to emulate. This passage ends with the words that Jesus came, not to be served, but to serve and to give his life for the ransom for many.

You're Gonna Have to Serve Somebody! That statement is a reality for all of us. Jesus, throughout his life was confronted with the question of whom to serve. The temptation story is about the devil trying to get Jesus to worship him. Throughout the gospels we continue to hear Jesus proclaim a different type of kingdom with the disciples, the priests, the Pharisees and all the rest not getting it and often ignoring his vision of God for their own. In the case of the Pharisees making them believe it was better for all to get rid of this trouble maker.

Jesus tries to redefine what it means to be first and great. Jesus said that to be first required being last and servant of all. Later he had demonstrated what this looks like in God's dominion as he welcomed children. Here he repeats the concept. To be great is to be a servant. That certainly challenges normal expectations, but even in antiquity, there was appreciation for rulers who provided public service. Jesus pushes matters to an extreme, however, when he goes on to say that to be first is to be a slave of all. Slaves were at the bottom of the social ladder, and there was no honor or reward in working for others as a slave.

We are confronted with the struggle on a daily basis as to who we are serving. Are we serving God as envisioned by Jesus? This means taking the role of a servant, a slave. Or are we serving the devil, to use Dylan's term? Or we could just as easily say the gods of power and wealth and prestige, because you're gonna have to serve someone. The disciples served the wrong god, at times, the church throughout the ages has, at times, served the wrong god, we even to this day get stuck sometimes equating everything to how it affects us and our desires.

We are always touched when we read about or encounter someone who tries to follow Jesus' vision of the kingdom. One of the reasons Pope Francis has become such a moral authority for the Christian church, not just the Catholic Church, is that he truly tries to live a simple, servant style life even within all the constraints and trappings of the

papacy. Mahatma Ghandi, though not Christian, had this same imperative in his words because of his simple lifestyle. People understand that what they are doing and saying is truly for the good of all instead of just feathering their nest.

Here are a couple of examples of times I saw people serving the God Jesus came to proclaim. I recall a woman telling me who was going to be chair of the upcoming dinner. When she saw my look of surprise she said, "We all realize that she really doesn't have the skills to do this job but she has been such a hard worker it is time for her to get a little recognition. I will do most of the work of chair but make sure she gets the credit. I have been thanked in the past, it is her time." And when that woman welcomed people to the dinner as its chair, there was a great big smile on her face.

She lived near the church and someone years before I came there had asked her to make coffee for a meeting. This was in the days of percolators which meant that if you had a group and needed 30 or more cups you had to start the coffee at least a half hour before the meeting. She had embraced that role and become known as the coffee lady. She not only made the coffee but made sure the cups were set out, the sugar and cream as well. Afterwards she would come back and clean it all up. It became her ministry. We rarely thought about the gift she gave. We just put a note in her box and would arrive for meetings and all would be in readiness. Afterwards we would leave a mess knowing it would be cleaned up and things put back in the morning. It was a quiet service. When she got ill and could not continue this ministry, it was then that we came to realize what a special service she had given to us all.

You're Gonna Have to Serve Somebody! Jesus hopes it is his kingdom of service and sacrifice instead of the one where you struggle to sit in the best seats. The choice is yours.