

Sermon – 3rd Pentecost
Romans 6:12-23
June 25, 2017

“Gotta Serve Somebody”

In 1979 Bob Dylan won a Grammy Award for his song “*Gotta Serve Somebody*.” Strange title because rock music in general and Bob Dylan particularly were thought to be thoroughly anti-authoritarian. In a word association game not a lot of people would pair “obedience” with “rock n roll.” Rock legend Chuck Berry once said; “*I have found no happiness in any association that has been linked with regulation and custom...In other words, conformity is not the fragrance found in my fantasies.*” Well, there you are. Nevertheless Dylan won music’s highest award for a song that concluded one way or another everybody serves somebody.

He wrote; “*You might be a rock n roll addict prancing on the stage, you might have drugs at your command, women in a cage. You might be a businessman or some high degree thief, they may call you doctor or they may call you chief, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes you are, you’re gonna have to serve somebody.*” But here’s the fascinating part of Dylan’s song...he went on to suggest who this somebody is...saying “*it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.*”

I’m not quite ready to put an anthology of Bob Dylan songs in my collection of systematic theology – but whether he intended or not Dylan’s song is a pretty good cover for our lesson from Romans. “*You gotta serve somebody*” Paul says in Romans 6 – and while he doesn’t explicitly name Satan, the implication of his words is that there is some enormous influence out there which he calls “sin” – which New Testament Scholar N.T. Wright described as some sort of “*supra-human power - a force or energy which is more than the sum total of unhelpful instincts or wrong actions.*” It’s quite plainly allegiance to the wrong “somebody.” Everybody has “*gotta serve somebody*” – and Paul clearly states, even if Dylan merely infers, that there is only one good option – God.

Paul is writing to people of Jewish and Gentile ethnicity who have already become Christians, telling them plainly to live up to this new identity, and more than an identity – a new reality. Christians he says have or should have new allegiances because they live under new governance – the kingdom of God. They have literally been brought into a new life – the word “righteousness” in our lesson (as in “*you have become slaves to righteousness*”) can and probably should be understood as God’s “covenant purposes.” Paul certainly understands that a Christian’s “end” is eternal life – what we associate with “heaven.” But what Paul means here is that thinking of our end only as “eternal life in Christ Jesus” when we die is a stunted view of what the life to come is.

Jesus the Messiah had by his death and resurrection brought “*the life to come*” into the present and Christians are summoned to live that life – now. We are to “practice it” - not in the sense of an aspiring golfer on the driving range trying to figure out how to swing a golf club the right way but as an educated and skilled doctor or lawyer “practice” their trade – with precision and utmost adherence to the demands of their craft. With Dylan- like candor, Paul says we either practice

Christianity the right way or the wrong way. And the wrong way is to keep mimicking the cultures we grew up and still live in. For the Jews that was the naïve belief that their ancestry alone put them in the good graces of God and that anyway they were pretty good at keeping the commandments – or at least better than anyone else. Which is a little like saying, when being chased by a hungry bear, that I'm ok so long as I keep a step or two ahead of my camping buddy!

The Gentiles had the other “practice” problem – they rather liked their former culture's acceptance of near unrestrained personal freedom and thought as long as their souls were right they could do whatever they wanted to with their bodies. Paul says neither even approximate the culture they have been called into – the kingdom of God, the way of the cross, service in the name of the Servant King. And he asks rhetorically but piercingly “*what benefit did you ever gain by serving those ways of life.*” Verse 23 of our lesson, the famous “*wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus*” in effect says; “*the benefits of your old way of life are an illusion, a dead end - the benefits of God's way of life is starting your eternal life right now – today!*” But what might that look like?

There was recently an election in Great Britain. A Member of Parliament, Timothy Farron, was the leader of the Liberal Democratic party – a small but still an influential one in British Parliamentary politics. The Liberal Democrats, as their name suggests, supported a more generous social agenda, higher taxes and more government programs for the lower economic classes of society, and of course such things as acceptance of same-gender marriage and protections on the right to have an abortion. Mr. Farron also was a Christian – a more recent convert and in modern parlance he was an “Evangelical.”

He resigned just after the election, not because his party fared poorly, but because he could no longer reconcile his faith and the demands of being the leader of a party so often at odds with the teachings of his faith. Now lest we assume it was just liberal democrats uncomfortable with a Christian leading their party, it should be pointed out the leader of the conservative party of Great Britain – Theresa May has likewise been challenged about her Anglican faith. The issue is not so much what Ms. May or Mr. Farron support politically as what they “think” spiritually.

In his own words, Mr. Farron said “*to be a political leader, especially of a progressive liberal party in 2017 – and to live as a committed Christian, to hold faithfully to the Bible's teaching has felt impossible for me.*” He concluded “*I joined our party when I was 16, it is in my blood, I (thoroughly) love our history, our people and our party. (So) imagine what would lead me to voluntarily relinquish that honour. In the words of Isaac Watts, it would have to be something “so amazing, so divine (it) demands my heart, my life, my all.”*”

N.T. Wright said “*virtue is what happens when someone has made a thousand small choices requiring effort and concentration to do something which is good and right but which doesn't come naturally. And then on the thousand and first time, when it really matters, they find that they do what's required automatically.*” In other words it's the practice of the right way of life. Everybody's gotta serve somebody. And there is nobody better than Jesus – nobody with love so amazing it deserves your heart, your life, your all. AMEN