

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost/July 2, 2017

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The Apostle Paul can sometimes sound a bit convoluted. He was extremely bright. And sometimes you have to unpack what he is saying. So this morning I turned to a commentary by last year's Nobel Laureate in Literature, Bob Dylan. In his 1979 song, "Gotta Serve Somebody," Dylan sings:

"You may be an ambassador to England or France" (Perhaps we might think of Ben Franklin on this 4th of July weekend)

"You may like to gamble, you might like to dance

You may be the heavyweight champion of the world

You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed

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"

Paul says, "Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies... but present yourselves to God..." In other words you're gonna have to serve one or the other. No one is autonomous or unaffected. If it is freedom you want, you'll have to serve the Lord. Because God is love, God is never coercive. Love is always freeing.

Does that mean that we are free to sin? Of course not, Paul answers. To do that only puts us back under sin's dominion. And the wages of sin, Paul says, is death. No, the only power stronger than death is love. And that is found when we serve the Lord. We live in a world of contending powers. We may stand under the dominion of fear, isolation, success above everything else,

domination over others, willfulness. What Paul would call sin. But it is pretty limiting. It ends when life does, if not before. On the other hand we may stand under the dominion of love, courage, community, contributing to a common goal, partnering with others, willingness. Paul might call this righteousness. It doesn't end; or Paul would say, "the end is eternal life." Why is that? Because love is stronger than death.

On Tuesday our Adult Education Committee showed the film "The Seventh Seal." The title comes from the Book of Revelation, but the movie is more a meditation on the dominion of death and that of the Holy Spirit that speaks in a still, small voice if at all. The movie directed by Ingmar Bergman is of the type that when it ends you ask yourself, "What just happened?" The film sits with you though and begins to offer up its insights. Two scenes at the end have some bearing on what Paul is trying to tell us. The first is of a woman kneeling down before the figure of death and giving him dominion. The second is of a juggler, a fool – for Christ perhaps. He is driving his horse and wagon on to the next chapter of his life with his wife and infant son. She smiles, not dismissively, at her husband with his dreams and visions. It reminded me of Peter at the Pentecost when the followers of Jesus filled with the Spirit were speaking in a cacophony of languages about God's deeds of power. Peter explains, quoting the Prophet Joel, "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh... and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." The juggler may look foolish with his visions. The others, however, under the dominion of death, link arms in a fitful dance toward nothing.

We live in a world, Paul says, of contending powers. No one can stand apart. You have to kneel before one or the other. You gotta serve somebody as Bob Dylan wrote. You either bow before sin that leads to death and blindness, or before the Spirit that leads to love and a life of vision. For Paul, baptism marks the change in what has sovereignty over our lives. It transitions us from the realm of sin and death to the realm of love and life, so that we become instruments of righteousness. To be righteous does not mean to be holier than thou. It means to be in right relationship with God – God's forgiveness, God's grace, God's love. The phrase "in right relationship" reminds me of carpentry.

When the wall studs of a room are bowed outward they need to be planed down until they come true, that is are in alignment and then the wall will be straight. In the same way a real prophet, Jeremiah said, is one whose message has come true, that is in alignment with the will of God. Our lives come true when they are lived under the dominion of God, that is, when we are aligned with God's will rather than our own.

One of the marks of standing under the dominion of Christ is praise. Praise is recreating a world that is true, that is aligned with God's will which is the wellbeing of all. Praise is the opening of Psalm 89, "Your love, O Lord, for ever will I sing." Love is stronger than death. It is a forever song! Jesus says praise is welcoming the other. And when the other is thirsty, weary, when the whole body longs for water and the mouth is dry, praise is giving that little one a cup of cold water. Jesus sometimes talked of himself as that water which is capable of quenching thirst for abundant life, for meaning, for love that is stronger than death, for eternal life. Nearly the very last words of the Bible are these, "And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift" (Rev. 22: 17). Praise is offering that invitation. Praise is caring for the needs of another who is suffering. Praise is not timid. It has resurrection power. It offers to another a vision or dream of a new way of life no longer in thrall to death, but obedient to the Spirit that is free and whose love is for ever.

"You are slaves of the one whom you obey," says the Apostle; or "You gotta serve somebody," says the Nobel Laureate. Both are aware that we live in a world of contending powers. You can dance toward nothing, pictures the film director, or you can drive off into the next chapter of life with a vision. Paul would encourage us to live out our baptism. Be soaked in love; quenched by the water of life. Live the transition from the dry dominion of sin to the fertile faith that God is present and love is sure. When we stand in the reality that *love* is stronger than death, then we manifest this resurrection power through praise. So let us offer the cup of cold water. Take the water of life as a gift. It is only in the realm of faith that life can come true, that you find yourself aligned with the One whose love is living water that gushes up to eternal life (John 4: 14). *Amen.*