SERVE SOMEBODY

You are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness—Ro 6:17

Last week we talked about the great news for Christians that we have a Good Shepherd who knows us intimately by name. That we his flock are protected by Christ from all those lesser people and things that try to disguise their voice and call our names, voices which end up taking away our lives, rather than offering it in abundance. There is one catch, however, that I did not get to. There is always a catch, of course, if someone tries to tell you otherwise; run the other way! The catch of having a good shepherd is that on some level we have to accept ourselves as sheep. Now, we aren’t literally sheep; this is a metaphor. It means that in relationship to God, we are to be like sheep to our good shepherd; meek, trusting and obedient.

This couldn’t be a more unpopular metaphor today. One of the hallmarks of our post-modern age is a suspicion of all authority. More and more people do not trust that elected officials of government do anything except protect their own interests. More and more people believe that news providers simply slant their information to serve their supporter’s interests. More and more people believe that even the church does more to protect its own institutional interests, than perpetuate the mission of its founder.

So while I doubt the metaphor of God as shepherd and we as sheep was ever wildly popular, it is most unpopular in this day and age. Nobody wants a shepherd who leads, shelters and protects us; we are too distrustful of authority and proudly self-made for any of that. But whether or not we want a shepherd, the question we explore today is do we all serve one anyway. The assertion of Paul in today’s Bible reading is that, like it or not, human beings are never not under the obligation or authority of someone or something. We are all sheep, the only question is to whom do we belong.

Paul puts it this way, "you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness." The real question then is not whether you will follow and serve a higher authority—a shepherd—in your life, but which one will you follow. Will we follow our ego needs or some deeper aspect of our selves? Will we follow ambition or honor? Will we chase after success or significance? It's not a question of whether, but of what, and Paul urges Christians to be slaves not of unrighteousness—based on immediate and passing needs, but of righteousness, which are rooted in ultimate and everlasting divine virtues like faith, hope and love.

If Paul’s words are too old and theological for you, allow me to share the same profound wisdom using more modern and informal words. One of the first songs I ever remember hearing, was from Bob Dylan’s first album released after converting to Christianity in 1979, the song is called ‘You Gotta Serve Somebody.’

_Might like to wear cotton, might like to wear silk/Might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk
You might like to eat caviar, you might like to eat bread/You may be sleeping on the floor, sleeping in a king-sized bed

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.

If I may bring the song lyric back into this sermon, you may like the Apostle Paul and you may like Bob Dylan, but they both say you’ve got to serve somebody. No one and no side is pure in this world. No man or woman is an island, free from the fallen nature of the human soul and all of our institutions. There is no way around this and no one above this. The only way up is down, indeed it is only by bowing in prayerful service that we are raised up in character and glory.

The Gospel words and life of Jesus remind us of this over and again. For it is his humble obedience as the Lamb of God which makes being called a sheep an honor and not an offense. It makes serving others not a burden, but the means by which we are all lifted up. And so...Mom and Dad you’ve gotta serve somebody this week. Pastor and parish council you’ve gotta serve somebody this week. Congressman, Cardinal or CEO you’ve gotta serve somebody this week. Receptionists or retiree, you’ve gotta serve somebody this week. No matter who you are and what you do, you’ve gotta serve somebody this week. There’s just one question. Whom are you going to serve? Now and always; amen.