

John 12:24-26
Creekside COB
June 29, 2008

“You’ve Got to Serve Somebody”

Back in the 90’s there was a rumor adrift that the songwriter and folk-rock legend Bob Dylan had become a Christian. I did not hear or read anything Bob Dylan had to say about it. There was no confirmation or denial of his reported conversion, but Dylan released a song during this period that seemed to indicate the direction he was leaning. He sang:

**You may be an ambassador to England or France,
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.***

**You may be a state trooper, you might be a young Turk,
You may be the head of some big TV network,
You may be rich or poor, you may be blind or lame,
You may be living in another country under another name**

But you’re gonna have to serve somebody...

**You may be a construction worker working on a home,
You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a
dome,
You might own guns and you might even own tanks,
You might be somebody's landlord, you might even own
banks**

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

You're gonna have to serve somebody.

You cannot sit on the sidelines of life. Whether you intentionally decide, or choose not to decide, you have made a decision to be in the service of someone or some thing.

There was a wealthy miller who had a son named Alexander. He lived in the village of Schwarzenau, Germany and was a member of the Reformed Church, which, along with the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Church, was the only church, recognized as legal.

Had you called Alexander Mack "a member" of the reformed church he would have corrected you. He was "in" the state church, but he was not "of" it. Membership meant nothing to him. Alexander and other like-minded people believed the church had missed the mark by a mile, and bore little resemblance to the church that Jesus created. Mack's allegiance was not to the institution, but to its founder who declared, *"You're gonna have to serve somebody. Yes indeed, you're gonna have to serve somebody."* This isn't exactly how Jesus said it, but it's close. *"If anyone serves me, they must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also (John 12:24-26)."*

Mack belonged to a group of eight seekers who strove to live as close possible to the way of Jesus revealed in the gospels. A deeply spiritual man named Ernst Hochman von Hochenau, an influential leader in the movement called radical pietism, was an inspiration to these five men and three women. He said the church is a community of disciples dedicated to spiritual renewal, the study of scripture, and a lifestyle in harmony with Jesus and out of step with society.

Church historians use the term "primitivism" to describe Christian sects that wanted to model themselves after the example of the early church. Like many today who say the church is broken and out of touch the great issues of life, the primitivists wanted to turn back the clock -- back to the time before the church and the state got cozy and became a big

business. They believed the earliest model of the church was best, and strove to imitate it as closely as possible.

Mack and company could not hold fast to their convictions and remain within the Reformed church, so they made a bold decision that changed the course of their lives and is the reason we are a church today. Adult baptism. Please remember -- unlike today, baptism wasn't just a moving moment of worship played out before a sanctuary of smiling faces, a baptistry filled with bathtub temperature water, and afterward, coffee and cookies in the fellowship hall.

The baptism of the first eight Brethren was a declaration of "dependence" upon and life-long commitment to Jesus. It was also an act of civil disobedience, forbidden by the state and punishable by imprisonment and public scorn and the confiscation of property and assets.

Some of you have been to Schwarzenau and stood on the bank of the Eder River near where the baptisms took place in 1768. It is not known precisely where it was done. We do not know the date. It was kept secret. We do know that they chose lots to determine who would baptize Alexander Mack. In turn, Mack baptized the other seven.

Although he was their leader and minister, they rejected the idea of naming the movement after him or any individual. It was a church with no name, no constitution and by-laws, no articles of incorporation, and no property. They simply called themselves "Brethren," and declared that Jesus had made them a family.

Their courageous act was a statement that they were not going to submit to a country, a king, or a creed. They were committed to serving somebody. They were drafted into the service of Jesus.

Three centuries have passed, and now we look back from whence we came -- not to idealize our past; not to be nostalgic about past glories; not to get back to doing what made us great in ages past. When driving you look out the windshield to the

road ahead. You will not be a successful driver if you go forward and keep your eyes glued to the rear-view mirror to see where you've been. Our 300th anniversary is a time to see what shaped the character of our ancestors, and ask whether the same values shape *our* character.

Part of the answer was discovered in 1901 by a pastor rummaging through old documents found in the Germantown Church of the Brethren, the first Brethren congregation in the United States. It was an impression made of sealing wax with the initials A. M. engraved on it. It was the seal of Alexander Mack. No one knows if it was made by Alexander senior or junior. What is important is what the symbol represents. You see it here, draped from the pulpit and printed on the bulletin cover. The symbol has three components -- a cross, a heart, and grape clusters.

The CROSS summarizes the story of Jesus' pure SACRIFICE of love. By his supreme act of offering his life, we have received the gift of abundant and eternal life. Frederick Buechner says, *"To sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love."*

The sacrifices of our ancestors were significant. Alexander Mack lost all of his wealth, winning the freedom of imprisoned religious dissenters. They lost their homes and livelihoods. They lost all their material possessions except for what they could carry with them as they were forced from one jurisdiction to another. They came to America in 1719 leaving family members, never to see them again. But it was a sacrifice they gladly made, drawing inspiration from scriptures like Philippians 3:8 --

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

The cross is the symbol of Jesus' sacrifice for our sake, and our sacrifice of service to him. The HEART on Mack's seal is the symbol of DEVOTION. A relative of the word "devotion" is piety, which comes from an Italian word, pietas, which means "*unusual familial devotion.*"

We belong to the family of God. As members of God's family, our relationships matter. For the early Brethren, devotion to the family of faith meant calling each other, "brother" or "sister." It meant greeting one another with the "holy salutation" otherwise known as the "holy kiss." It meant praying for, caring for, and giving of one's self and resources to help fellow Christians.

The grape clusters on Mack's seal are a symbol of fruitful life. The question we ask is not just, "Are you a Christian?" The question is, "Do you have anything to show for it?" Are you lifting or leaning? Are you a stepping-stone or a stumbling block? Are you a giver or a taker? Are you a participant or an observer? Are you a hand behind the plow or a fly in the ointment? By observing your life, can people tell who you serve?

In Galatians 5:22 Paul paints a picture of a sacrificial, devoted, fruitful life: "*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...*" With these words in mind, let me share a story about a fruitful life, not FROM our tradition, but certainly OF it. Osceola McCarty lives in Mississippi. She's an old black woman who never married and dropped out of school in the sixth grade to do laundry -- work she would do for the rest of her life. At age twelve she dropped out of school to care for a sick aunt and help her mother and grandmother with their backyard laundry business.

Osceola scrubbed colored clothes on a washboard and boiled the whites in a big black pot in the backyard. She strung them on the clothesline to dry. She repeated this routine day in and out for seventy-five years. Her day began at sun-up and ended at sundown. Not many people knew about her until she was eighty-seven years old. That is when she gave away her life's savings --

all \$150,000 of it to the University of Southern Mississippi for black student scholarships.

Her picture was plastered on newspapers and reporters got in line to learn about this remarkable woman. Local businesses gave matching gifts, and the first recipient of a scholarship formed a close bond with Osceola. And one question was asked more than any other -- *“Why didn’t you spend the money on yourself?”* With a twinkle in her eye she answered, *“I am spending it on myself.”*

Osceola McCarty was connected. She belonged to an extended family in which what you did for someone else came back to you.

When we think of God enlisting us to do the work of the Kingdom we catch ourselves thinking we are a little privileged, and suited for special work. What we learn instead is that God’s work happens in the trenches where life gets messy. Barbara Brown Taylor says, *“When we are baptized we think we are volunteering for a life of holy order, which of course turns out to be nothing but washing feet.”*

300 years of history and the witness of our Brethren ancestors teach us the same. We want to be **ROOTED IN GOD**, bound to him through the sacrifice of Jesus the Son. We want to **GROW IN JESUS** -- growing in our devotion to him and the family of faith. We want bear **FRUIT IN THE SPIRIT**, believing that faith in Jesus will bring a harvest.

*But first, you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed,
You’re gonna have to serve somebody.*