

"CAN I HELP YOU?"

September 9, 1990

TEXT: Matthew 20:26-28 ". . . Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve"

Isn't it strange how, every now and then, a phrase --or sometimes even a single word-- can bring the most vivid images flooding into our consciousness: a name out of the past, the title of a favorite song, and, for some of us these days, the words, Saudi Arabia.

Well, something like that happened to me this past week. I was talking to my son in Kansas, when almost matter-of-factly, he mentioned that the state fair begins this week-end. I do not suppose that means much to many of you, but for me it brought back all sorts of memories. For, you see, my church there had a pancake stand on the state fairgrounds, and, during the fair, I spent a part of almost every day working in that stand or bringing in supplies.

Much of the time, it was my job to fry the pancakes on a huge griddle that stood in the front window of the stand. And let me tell you, if you have never ever stood over a hot griddle in Kansas, when the outside temperature is over 100 degrees, you have not missed a darned thing.

That is one memory I would not mind being able to forget. But, when I think of those fairs, I also think of something else. I think of men and women, boys and girls greeting hungry fair-goers with the cheery words, "Can I help you?"

And, when you stop to think of it, that is a very appropriate question for every Christian to ask, not just in a pancake stand, but in all of our relationships. In the 20th chapter of Matthew, Jesus said: ". . . Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve"

That last statement set the tone for Jesus' whole life. Judaism, then as now, was characterized by its belief in the coming of a Messiah. But different people had differing ideas about what the Messiah would be like. Some looked for a "Son of God" Messiah, one who would lead an angel army to free Israel from the rule of Rome and lead her back to the splendor of David's Golden Age. Others awaited a "Son of David", a more

human figure who, like the Maccabaeans before him, would also be a military hero.

But Jesus had a different vision of himself. He took upon himself the title, "Son of Man", associated by many with Isaiah's idea of the Suffering Servant. Perhaps that is why he was born in a stable and not in a palace. It was probably why he so often called himself the "Son of Man." And it was surely why, on the last night of his life, he washed his disciples' feet.

We have heard that story so often it may be hard for us to understand the enormity of it. Oh, we can certainly see it as an act of humility, but, for Jews, it was much, much more than that. No Jewish male --except for Jesus-- would ever lower himself in such a way. Even Jewish slaves were never asked to wash a guest's feet if there were Gentile slaves available.

Yet here we find our Lord girding himself with a towel and performing what was considered the most menial and degrading of tasks. And on the last night of his life at that. Surely that was no accident. He was trying to show us that the way to his Kingdom was service. Not that we can earn salvation, but if we are really right with God we will want to serve Him.

So, if we are really his disciples, it stands to reason he wants us to be servants, too. It may be more appropriate for a Christian to think in terms of "Am I helping?" than "Am I saved?" For, as the great Scottish preacher, Alexander MacLaren, observed, "The church is a workshop, not a dormitory; and every Christian man and woman is bound to help in the common cause."

It is important that we be reminded of that as we begin this new year of Church activities. And it is also important that we recognize it, not as a burden laid upon us, but as Good News that sets us free.

It is true that service is a Christian duty. William Grenfell said, "Service is the rent we pay for the space we occupy." It is something we owe to God. And it is also something that we owe to others. When God wants something done a baby is born. And sometimes, if God is lucky, that baby grows up to do the thing for which he or she was created.

Otherwise, it may never be done. I once read about a little boy in the ghetto who was teased by someone who said, "If God loves you, why doesn't He take care of you? Why doesn't God tell someone to bring you shoes and a warm coat and better food?" The little lad thought for a minute, and then replied, "I guess He does tell somebody, but somebody forgets."

If the world is less than we think it should be, if there are situations and conditions we think are wrong, things we wish someone would do something about, what are we doing about it. T. Cecil Myers writes, "No one has a right to complain about the

world going in the wrong direction unless he is doing all he can personally with his energy, money, and time to stop it."

And that applies to all of us. No one is too small, or too old, or too weak, or too poor to be of service somewhere.

"No service in itself is small,
None great though earth it fill;
But that is small that seeks its own
And great that seeks God's will."

And not one is too big either. In his book *Living Faithfully*, J. Allen Blair tells of a black man who was struggling to get to Grand Central Station in New York City. The wind blew fiercely, and the rain beat down on him as he walked along with two heavy suitcases.

At one point he was almost ready to collapse, when a man suddenly appeared by his side, took the suitcases, and said, in a strangely familiar voice, "We're going the same way. You look as if you could use some help." When they reached the shelter of the station, the weary traveler, Booker T. Washington, asked his benefactor, "Please, Sir, what is your name?" And the man replied, "The name, my friend, is Roosevelt. Teddy Roosevelt."

It was Bob Dylan who wrote:

"You may be an ambassador to England or France;
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance;
You may be the heavy-weight champ 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."

We're "gonna" have to serve somebody, not only because we owe it to God, and not only because we owe it to others, but also because we owe it to ourselves. That is what I meant when I said we should hear Christ call to service, not as burden laid upon us, but as Good News that liberates us.

Most of us want our lives to count for something. When we come to the end of our days here on earth, we would like to feel that somehow or other we have made a difference. But how do we do that? By making a lot of money? By accumulating power and using it to make the world over in our own image? By earning the praise of others and being considered famous? None of those.

The great Baptist preacher, George W. Truitt, once said, "It is not the talents one has that make him great, however many and brilliant they may be; it is not the vast amount of study that gives mental enrichment to the mind and life; it is not in shining social qualities; it is not the large accumulation of wealth that secures peace and honor. In none of these, measured by God's standards, does greatness reside. The true greatness consists in the use of all the talents one has in

unselfish ministry to others." "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve . . ."