

# First Presbyterian Church of Watertown

Mark 1.35-39  
"He Was Right Here"  
The Rev. Dr. Fred G. Garry  
October 15, 2017

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

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

You're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You're gonna have to serve somebody

You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride  
You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side  
You may be workin' in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair  
You may be somebody's mistress, may be somebody's heir

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

Bob Dylan

This was the first song by Bob Dylan on his first Christian album in 1979. "You're gonna have to serve somebody." It's not my favorite Dylan tune, but has to be counted as one that carries the most truth, cuts to the core. The answer may be blowing in the wind, the times may indeed be changing and things have changed, but amidst all the winds of change one thing remains: we are all slaves and prisoners; we are all living under the hand of fate and the tyranny of time; we are all slaves. You're gonna serve somebody.

What I like about the Dylan song is the multiplicity of masters. Some people serve money, some serve desire, some people serve power, some people serve disease and misery. The masters are many, but the truth is one: we choose our master. We choose the one master we serve.

Masters come with a lot of faces, a lot of justifications and arguments. The one addicted to money and serving a master who sits upon a mountain of debt and excess finds the return of serving greed. Each day the one who follows greed has to justify the conspicuous consumption, the reason they have so much and others have so little.

The one who serves anger and bitterness must continue to stoke the fire of insult and injury. Someday, not today, but someday watch the 24-hour news channels. Watch them and see how long it takes before they seek to stoke your indignation, to fuel your ire, to conjure your outrage. The master of anger has many slaves, many imprisoned to envy. Nothing gets built by these slaves, but they know how to destroy.

The master with the most faces is the most common. Many believe they are their own master. I am in charge of me; I made me; I earn my keep. The self-made man; the one who has determined his or her own fate. Being your own master is like cutting your own hair; you can do it, but it's not pretty. And this is the most exhausting master. A generation of children have been raised to believe they are their own masters. Ask a teacher today how that is going? A lot of bad hairdos.

For the last month, the men's breakfast on Monday has been talking about heroin and the opioid epidemic. Fascinating. I have found two take-aways. The first is the slavery of addiction. Other drugs can master you; addiction can take many forms. Yet, heroin and opioids makes the slavery unmistakable. We hide lots of addictions, but this one does not blend very well. And with this comes a truthfulness. The mastery of the addict is so complete, so obvious you cannot pretend or simply hope for the best. The truth is: ruin is on its way.

We are reading a book called *Dreamland*. Very insightful, revealing. Perhaps the greatest insight for me is the powerful chain of this master. There are a lot of masters in the world, many to choose from. Some are good, some bad; you might serve the devil or it may be the lord. But heroin, oh my. That is a wicked strong master. You not only serve the drug, become a slave to its effect, you also give up your choice to serve anything, anyone else.

Jesus said, you are a slave, but cannot serve two masters. You will hate one and love the other. True. But we try. We try to serve Jesus and we try to serve vengeance; we try to serve justice and mercy. We try even when we know we will fail. What heroin makes so clear is this: it takes away all questions, all choices. There is only one master; only one is in charge.

From time to time I need to navigate the dreaded phone tree of a call center. I need help from someone over the phone. Not always, but sometimes, things break down. The answer of the person on the phone is not the right one, not true, or just not helpful. I don't blame or berate the person on the phone; they are not in charge. I do, though, ask a question: who tells when to come to work? There is always a pause. Who tells you when to come to

work? Whatever answer I get, sometimes it is a name, sometimes a title, whatever the answer I thank the person and say, "that is who I want to talk to now." Try it; it works. Somebody is always in charge.

Now, this may be the point of the sermon where you wonder, what in the world does this have to do with our passage? And that is fair and I will get there shortly. But I am also concerned that you are wondering if all this talk of masters and slaves is nothing but esoteric foppery. So before we take up the passage consider this: about 150 years we fought a war here, a devastating war over masters and slaves. Some say our nation was born in this fight; some say the fight continues. And consider this: about that same time a man took the philosophy of Hegel and asked what would happen if we applied it to the truth of master and slave. That was Karl Marx- the earth shook with the question. The master and the slave are not just ideas and metaphors. But let's get to the passage.

I have parts of the bible that mean a great deal to me. Psalm 30.5, weeping may tarry through the night, but joy comes with the morning. I carry that with me always. They are like sheep without a shepherd is another. "The hills are filled with lost sheep." "Leave her alone, she did a beautiful thing" is a treasure. *Enter through the narrow gate; consider the lilies.* These words keep me steady, keep me going. I have never asked if our passage today is the best of all, but it's really close.

It seems like, feels like a throw away story. Jesus got up to pray; people didn't know where he went; they found him; he decided to go to another village. Not really the stuff of David and Goliath or the parting the Red Sea. This does not have the gravitas of Calvary or the signature of the lilies and linen cloth. Certainly the beauty of the early songs of the church embedded in Paul's letters exceed this crude little tale: not counting equality with God as something to be grasped he emptied himself and became a slave. That is lovely. Our reading is not big, not beautiful, not very poetic, but I like it. It's probably my favorite.

My devotion is born of two things: panic and assurance.

Panic is with Peter. I shared with Casey this week the most important safety tip, pastoral lesson I have learned thus far: don't lose Jesus. Jesus is wily, unpredictable, flighty: you need to keep a close watch. Keep your eye on Jesus. Like the song of Don McLean: the three men I admire most they took the last train for the coast, the day the music died. Jesus is like that. He takes off.

Peter doesn't seem to know this yet. Indeed, spoiler alert, Peter doesn't really get this ever. He will struggle with trying to control, predict, determine, direct Jesus throughout the gospel. And throughout the gospel he will fail. Peter will say, you can't suffer; he will say, let's build three booths; he will say, I will not forsake you. All wrong; all meant to control. You keep an eye on Jesus, but you don't control Jesus: pastoral safety tip number one.

I like our reading today because it has all the stuff of the later stories of Peter's failure, the lessons are here about control and how we panic trying to bring control, but there is no rebuke, no chastisement. Peter is not called Satan; God doesn't tell him to be quiet from sky; there is no talk of denials. It is as if we can learn humility here without humiliation. I like that.

Most of us have been in a moment like Peter. Something good happens to us and we dread we will lose it. We say things like, nothing good lasts forever; or enjoy it while it lasts. Peter found something great in Jesus. Consider the power, the presence of God. And then imagine waking up in the morning and he is gone. He was just right there. Peter panicked. It says they searched everywhere.

How many of us have lived this? We all have. And sometimes we don't find what we lost. That is the beauty of this story. Peter searches; he doesn't give up; and he finds Jesus. And if you are going to follow Jesus, you need to get used to this. Don't try to keep Jesus in a book or a box, don't try to put Jesus in your tradition or your truth; don't bury him in an altar or in ardor. Doesn't end well. Jesus is wily; he takes off.

What is more, there is no assurance in our passage. Jesus doesn't say to Peter, "hey, don't worry." There is no gentle chastisement of: "Peter, I am not going to leave you." These are the assurances we give to people. Jesus doesn't. Later on he will tell the disciples he will never abandon them, forsake them. But here he offers no assurances.

There are no assurances because Jesus is going in a direction. We like destinations; we want to know where we are going. Jesus is going in an undetermined direction. Let's go over this way. This is a movement, an unfolding, a path. He just told them, "follow me." He didn't say, "stay here with me."

Our reading today is what I like to call a fair warning. If you want to follow Jesus, if he is going to be your master, if you are going to be his servant, his friend, get ready: he is wily and he offers no assurance about how life will unfold. At least not the assurance we like to keep and offer.

You got to serve somebody. It may be greed or lust; it may be anger or belligerence. You may abide in the great lie of our time that you can find the kingdom of God and be your own master. If you want to follow Jesus, you need to choose Jesus. But that choice doesn't mean you are in control of life or that life is now a predictable safe path. He was just right here.

And be forewarned, he doesn't play well with other masters. Following Jesus uncovers our fears. Maybe our greatest fear: we don't want to live without certainty; we don't want to live without a sense of being in control; we don't want to live without guarantees.

That is my favorite part of giving and tithing and stewardship. Offerings are gifts, not exchanges. You don't get what you paid for with grace. Jesus is not bought or sold. He gave his life that we could have life; he paid our price, says Paul, not as a debt to be collected, but a gift if we accept life from him, if we call him Lord, master.

This is the beauty of our passage. We can see how the life of faith is not a determination, but a direction. If you give your life away, you will find it. You will find life made new, born anew. Life will become more than what you can predict or determine if you follow Jesus. That is a promise not a transaction; that is a leap of faith not an invoice.

You gotta serve somebody. Serve Jesus; follow him. Give your life away more and more. Find freedom where it is offered not where we try to make it. Be patient, but diligently search. Jesus is wily; he takes off. Nothing we can do about that. We can, though, shed the fears that keep us serving bad masters; we can leave aside the chains of pettiness and greed; we can find the freedom of living life as a gift given and offered in kind. You gotta serve somebody; serve Jesus. Amen.