

“Be Careful What You Ask For!”
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I Samuel 8:4-20

In 1979, Bob Dylan was well past his prime when he wrote the song, *You Gotta Serve Somebody* for his album, *Slow Train Coming*. But by then, he had lived enough of life to know that the title of his song was absolutely true. We do have to serve *somebody*. Or *something*. Some *idea*. Some *way*. It’s human nature. We can’t avoid it.

Dylan awkwardly wrote:

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

But you’re gonna have to serve *somebody*. That’s for sure.

Wow, that’s nowhere near *Blowin’ in the Wind*...

Anyway... Whom -- or what -- do *you* serve?

A masculine or feminine ideal that you see on TV or social media? Or something deeper? Or edgier?

In preparation for this sermon, I asked several friends and family members to tell me what they thought they served. I was surprised at how open they were about the idea that we really do each serve something.

The number one answer was the *Self*. In the last fifty years, the *Self* has come to usurp God as the center of our spiritual universe, replacing not only the Creator of All, but also many of our most important, and more *selfless* values.

What else do we serve? Here are some of the top answers I heard:

Desire. Maybe this is a subset of the *Self*, but our personal desires have supplanted our appreciation for community and the collective good. *As long as my kids and my partner and my friends and I are getting what we want, why should I worry about my neighbor?*

Dave Davies of The Kinks wrote, in his song, *Mr. Pleasant*:

*People say, Mr. Pleasant is good,
Mr. Pleasant is kind,
Mr. Pleasant's okay,
Mr. Pleasant don't mind.
As long as Mr. Pleasant's all right, hey hey.
How are you today?*

Some of us love and serve *Rules*. *Rules* make us feel comfortable and secure. I agree that rules are absolutely necessary for an orderly and safe society and for an ethical life, but they are never enough.

In his lush novel, *Narcissus and Goldmund*, Hermann Hesse wrote, *God is not contained only in the Commandments... They are only an infinitesimal part of (God). (People) may abide by the Commandments and be far from God.*

Some people worship *Celebrity*, either their own or others'. I have friends who simply take on the opinions of Rush Limbaugh, Howard Stern, or this politician or another without any critical evaluation.

Others serve a team or a particular athlete.

Of course, some serve *Sex* and some serve *Booze* or some other drug, building their days and evenings around the possibility of another encounter or drink or score.

In a town like Hingham, full of smart, accomplished people, good at our jobs, dedicated to the companies and organizations we've built or nurtured, the temptation of course is to make *Success* into a kind of god. There is nothing wrong with success – in fact, success can create all sorts of good – until the drive to succeed becomes all-consuming and undermines our most cherished values.

One of my best friends told me that *Security* is the false god he most often serves. He has wanted to leave his job for years. He's been desperately unhappy. But he hasn't taken the initiative to get a new position because he sees the automatic deposit go into his bank account every month... and he has a wife and two kids and a home and two cars... And... you get it.

Sameness. Safety. Security. Routine. You gotta serve *somebody*. Why not the devil you know?

The author of 1st Samuel wrote:

He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.

The “He” in these verses is of course any future king the people would choose. At God's urging, Samuel is trying to dissuade his people from choosing a king to rule over them.

We can understand why the Israelites want a king. All of their neighbors have one. Why not them? They are living in a dangerous world, full of raiders and robbers. A king would give them status and safety.

But Samuel warns them: Be careful what you ask for. The very thing you want so badly could potentially cause you pain and take away your freedom, your kids, even your soul.

Our national leaders have recently been debating this very point. How much information do we want our government to be able to have about us? Where is the line between safety and liberty?

This is a spiritual question, too.

As Christians, are we willing to look to Jesus as our ultimate authority or not? He was a human being, but also more than *just* a human being. He embodies God... He had -- and has -- the ability to gather people into loving community... to serve others unselfishly... to impart wisdom... to speak difficult truth and authentic justice to those in power... to connect people with God. These are the reasons I try my best to serve him above all others. But I fail all the time. I find myself serving all sorts of other gods and having to come back and rededicate myself to the God of Jesus Christ.

As American human beings, we are bad at following those in authority because of our infatuation with our *own* authority. And yet we each find something to serve, for better or for worse.

What if we were able to embrace our own authority, but also have the courage to serve God, who gives us everything we need to make this world into the place of peace and compassion that Jesus envisioned?

What if we were willing to serve God, above all others, so that we might become our very best selves, not just today but in all our days?

Amen