

bread for the journey

Gotta Serve Somebody

Here are a few lyrics from the glory days of rock 'n roll—circa 1970.

*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.*

*You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride
You may be a city councilman takin' 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*

*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*

If you remember the '70's, well then, you remember Bob Dylan. And if you remember Bob Dylan, you remember his "Gotta Serve Somebody." Everyone's guru and Biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann reminds us of Dylan's song. He was speaking of Pharaoh's hegemony over Ancient Israel. Israel had a choice to make: either Israel will continue to serve the gods and fleshpots of the Pharaoh, or Israel will serve Yahweh and the liberating demands of the Torah. Joshua put it to Israel like this: "Choose today, whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh." Bruggemann opens the Old Testament text for us and declares its imaginative intrusion upon our lives. So does Dylan. His lyrics have a provocative quality about them.

Jesus is as provocative. His declaration we cannot serve both the Lord and *mammon* continues to insinuate itself upon our ambivalent souls as we check the stock market with as much routine and faithfulness as we check and reflect upon the Biblical text for the day. No one can serve two masters. You will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth. (Matthew 6:24)

The inference, of course, is this: all of us must make choices. It is what we teach our clients during *treatment*. Treatment is all about teaching our clients to make healthy choices. We don't somehow magically infuse health and wellness into their fragile psyches. Instead, we lay upon them an urgent need: they must make serious life changing choices if they want the long and healthful life that is waiting for them.

The choice. It's an old story. Cain faced it before he murdered Abel. He heard the Voice, "Sin lies couched at the door, Cain, but you are able if you so choose, to overcome the murderous impulse of your heart." Ancient Israel faced it: would they stay put or risk a dangerous Red Sea crossing and chance the exciting possibility of living in a land "flowing with milk and honey?" Adolescents who months ago outlived the hospitality of long-suffering parents must make the choice to live with house rules or risk the responsibility of choosing to live in their own space.


This is not a choice of freedom versus slavery. It is a choice about whom or what we will serve. It is a choice about whom or what owns us. Freedom is a myth or merely relative freedom at best. Who could disagree with Kentucky farmer, poet and sage, Wendell Berry? He speaks of only the shadowy inchoate possibility of freedom: "Our present idea of freedom is only the freedom to do as we please: to sell ourselves for a high salary and a home in the suburbs." This is not freedom. Mammon is the owner and slave holder. Dylan is right: we gotta serve somebody. Somebody owns us. Who or what will it be?

An addict in recovery comes to terms with knowing something about ownership when he admits powerlessness over drugs and alcohol. The drug of choice was master of the house and keeper of the inn. During initial stages of recovery, he acknowledges what he worships, before whom he does obeisance, and on whose behalf he makes sacrificial offerings.

You gotta serve somebody. And this: "You gotta make a choice about whom to serve."
(continued on back)

Who then? Again, addicts in recovery make a decision to surrender their lives and will to the God of their understanding. It is not a matter of no longer being a slave/servant to another. It is only an issue of who the new owner is. St. Paul understood this when he acknowledged he was no longer a slave to the law but a slave to Christ. Freedom for a recovering addict means surrendering life and will to the God of his understanding.

Young adolescent clients love to flaunt their freshly minted atheism. Fifteen years young and already they have determined there is no god. After listening patiently to their squeaky rant, I often suggest to them that they have been chasing after and faithfully serving their drug of choice. It owns them. Quite a taskmaster too, I might add. "How's that working out for you?"

Wendell Berry speaks of another so-called freedom. It is really an obligation born out of an allegiance to God: it is the freedom to take care of ourselves and also one another. Recovering addicts in the program of AA say as much when after acknowledging a spiritual awakening to the reality and presence of God—the real deal, they experience a similar desire to carry the message of recovery to others and practice the principles of recovery in all their affairs. 






The Rev. Dr. William Lenters
Church Relations Coordinator

Rosecrance Health Network
1021 North Mulford Road
Rockford, IL 61107

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is a bi-monthly news and views letter from Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Rosecrance Church Relations Coordinator. Bread for the Journey is written on behalf of people who live with substance use and mental health disorders. Together, and by God's grace, we will try to make a difference.